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# Sustainable Meanings: The Contradictions, Values and Worth of Sustainability in Organisations

By

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## Acknowledgements

I started my academic career at the University of Lincoln by enrolling on the BA Management degree. It wasn't an intentional start to an academic career, rather, at the time I think I wanted to be a director or run my own business or something like that. However, whilst studying at Lincoln my interests were tweaked by the more critical and sociological aspects of management and organisation and less by the functional or instrumental. I am indebted to Linda Hitchin, Wolodymyr Maksymiw and especially Carole Brooke who were more than happy to encourage and push me towards a more critical and explorative mode.

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## Declaration and Inclusion of Material from a Prior Thesis

I declare that this thesis is my own work and has not been submitted for a degree at another university.

Versions of the first paper have been presented at the 2013 Critical Management Studies Conference in Manchester and a very early version was presented at the 2012 Standing Conference on Organisational Symbolism, Barcelona.

A version of the third paper in this thesis was presented at the 2013 Critical Management Studies Conference in Manchester.

## Summary

In this thesis I explore contemporary understandings and practices of sustainability. Based on an ethnographic study at Anuvelar Investments, a sustainable financial services organisation, I contribute to both the conceptual and strategic literature by drawing upon the theoretical resources of discourse theory. In doing so, I position sustainability as a discourse which has implications for how it can be conceptualised but also how it can be understood in practice. My overall questions relate to conceptualising the contested and contingent nature of sustainability, but also the role of subjectivity when understanding sustainability in practice. All of which, I later argue, contribute to the political role particular articulations of sustainability might play within society more broadly.

First, I note the ambiguous and contested nature of sustainability as being unavoidable due to the nature of language and discourse and its construction within an antagonism between pro-financial and pro-social/environmental logics. I contribute a conceptualisation of sustainability as a discourse that is set boundaries as to what it means within a particular context. This contextual understanding of sustainability shows how the discourse excludes and includes certain elements but also modifies or quilts other concepts, positions and ideas. It does so, I argue, due to the 'empty' quality of sustainability as a discourse, standing as an open yet powerful concept that can align various different positions and ideas.

Second, building upon an understanding of the ambiguous and contested nature of sustainability I explore instances of identification with sustainability at Anuvelar Investments. Such an exploration mobilises the concepts of fantasy and enjoyment to contribute an understanding of the affective character of sustainability. Based upon interview data and observations I point to the beatific and horrific fantasies that engage and disgust individuals at Anuvelar Investments. Although the beatific character of sustainability provides a source of enjoyment for many, the horrific fantasies that are concealed within and outside the discourse are deemed equally pertinent in the maintenance of a sustainable subject. In so doing, I contribute to and problematise the sustainability literature that calls for employee engagement with the values of sustainability.

Third, I contribute to the debates within critical management studies (CMS) in reference to the empirical work produced in this thesis and the particular case study of Anuvelar Investments. In presenting a vignette from my ethnographic study at Anuvelar, I explore the many ways in which it is possible to critique certain practices performed at Anuvelar. However, drawing on the political theory of Chantal Mouffe and discourse theory more broadly I present a different approach to critique that seeks a more positive approach and a more productive platform for engagement.

Overall this thesis provides an important contribution to an understanding of sustainability as a discourse within contemporary organisations. In addition to this, it puts forward an argument that queries whether sustainability should always be seen as hijacked by or co-opted into capitalism. Instead, I propose that sustainability can in fact be a useful discourse from which to challenge the status quo, albeit dependent upon its articulation.





## Research Methodology

In this section of my thesis I will justify, explain and detail the processes and actions that took me from my “raw” empirical data to the research findings that are examined, discussed and developed in this thesis. I have put quotation or scare-marks around “raw” as although data might be considered unrefined it always already associated with theory as van Maanen (2011: 222) notes:

“One could not pick up rocks without some sort of theory..”

In that regard, it is possible to see theory within the practice of picking up of rocks/data but also, considering the broadly post-structural ontological and epistemological assumptions of this work that stress the ambiguity, complexity and post-foundational nature of language and reality, in the way the rocks might be understood or appear. Subsequently, the typical schism or tightrope between theory and data that one is expected to walk or to leap between is rather different to broadly realist/positivist accounts or methodologies.

Nonetheless, I will still be detailing exactly what I did to collect my data, for instance, who I spoke to, what parts of the organisation I spent my time when observing and how I recorded and preserved the data collected. In so doing I will also justify my choice of methods in relation to the particular problems I investigated and the questions I sought to ask.

Furthermore, I will discuss any potential pitfalls and limitations and detail how they were avoided or mitigated. Advancing from this I detail the process by which I coded, questioned, explored and spotted prominent themes and key stories (Van Maanen, 2011) in my data in an iterative and retroductive (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) fashion. Such a strategy enabled me to maintain and be sympathetic to the blurred boundary between theory and data/practice alluded to above. I will finish this chapter by showing how initial codes and themes were developed and how key vignettes were selected and developed. The first

section is concerned with data collection methods and their relationship to the proposed research questions.

## Research Questions, Research Design and Data Collection

In this section I will begin a discussion on methodology, particularly the relationship between theory and method, by looking first to my research questions. Having presented my research questions I will present arguments that show why my chosen methods are relevant and applicable in terms of an epistemological position of what is possible to find out about a particular phenomenon and what tools or strategies I propose to access and develop this knowledge. Having done this I then explore the theoretical and more ontological character of my research questions and show the particular way in which I approach data, research and even the construction of my research questions in the first place.

My thesis is presented in three separate papers, two of which are predominantly empirical, in order to establish and substantiate my methodological process and choices it is first important to articulate my research questions in these two papers. In paper one I ask:

*What is the role of power in constructing particular meanings of sustainability?*

*In relation to power, how are the boundaries drawn with respect to sustainability within organisational practices?*

This paper focuses on the role of articulation in situating the meaning and purpose of sustainability in an organization and looks to explore individual and group 'lived' understandings of the meaning of sustainability in referent to power. In paper two I ask:

*What is the role of affect when examining the discourse of sustainability in a contemporary organisation?*

Similar to paper one, this paper looks to explore the lived nature of sustainability and to explore the relationship between affect and sustainability and the role it plays in the structuring of sustainability as a discourse. Both questions point to shared and individual understandings and are exploring an issue closely within an organisation, seeking individual's opinions and observing talk, text and practice. The proposed questions are not questions that are likely to be answered through the use of quantitative methods that are concerned with how many or how much. Rather, they are questions that are better explored through qualitative methods that seek to understand what, how and why (Pratt, 2008; Watson, 2011). Moreover, as the literature on sustainability suggests that there is no fixed definition of sustainability, it seemed appropriate to take an approach that looks to discover and explore, rather than to hunt and find (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). Within the literature there also seemed to be an adequate gap and a reason to problematize and explore sustainability from this perspective. Subsequently, I sought to understand how sustainability was discussed, how it came to be used to legitimate certain actions and also how it acted as a force for behaviours within the organisation. The best way to "capture" or detail and log such behaviours and instances was to get as close to the organisational context as possible through the use of an ethnography and associated methods. An ethnographic approach, similar to many qualitative methods, is good at capturing verbal and non-verbal behaviour, portraying perspectives and exploring feelings and experiences. Moreover, these processes are undertaken and thus contextualised within situations and time within a more or less 'natural environment' (Silverman, 2007). Ethnographic studies:

"...differ in terms of working style, place, pace, time and mix of evidentiary approaches (interviews, surveys, content analysis, network mapping etc.) yet all rely on some form of lengthy participant

observation, a rather stock if oxymoronic phrase that indexes one of the most impressive ways yet invented to make ourselves uncomfortable.” (Van Maanen, 2011: 219)

A fundamental part of my data collection (and analysis) was a participant observation where I spent 6 months in 2012 at Anuvelar Investments a sustainable financial services firm in the UK. Data collection consisted of observation (799 hours in total) which were recorded by the writing of field notes that included memos and voice recordings that I would later develop outside of the study setting (Van Maanen, 1988). These field-notes included my own thoughts, reflections, feelings, frustrations and successes. Fieldwork, for the ethnographer is a technique of gathering research materials:

“by subjecting the self – body, belief, personality, emotions, cognitions – to a set of contingencies that play on others such that over time one can more or less hear, feel and come to understand the kinds of responses others display (and withhold)” (Van Maanen, 2011: 219)

Fieldwork involves subjecting yourself to the life situation of others, in my case, that stretched from the workplace to the pub and even the golf course. It also entails going in every day and taking the same workload and stress as your participants/colleagues. However, unlike your colleagues you know that you can leave at any time but must act like that is absolutely not the case even if all you want to do is escape and write some things down. Usual routines, smoking habits, pleasures and friends all can change and did in fact change for me. Fieldwork involves an uprooting or decentring of the fieldworker, the fieldwork site provides a social world to explore and requires the questioning of part of if not all of the fieldworker’s beliefs and preconceptions (Ibid).

The ultimate aim of fieldwork is to explore how things work to then be in the position to explain this to others. Having access to the same places, people and events as the subjects under study provides a real opportunity to develop this understanding. This access also extends to (in some cases confidential) reports, records and the organisation’s intranet

which is usually completely off-limits for a researcher. My position was that of 'Participant as Observer' (Junker, 1960) where the members of the organisation under study knew I was involved in research, although, they did not know the exact details of my study.

As a supplement to observation, interviews can provide a sort of clarification to some observations and can also serve, as they do in my second paper, as an interesting entry point where it is possible to collect what individual's think they do, or would like to think they do or even project what they think you want them to do. These 'situated' interviews allow a real rigour to the handling of data (Whittle, 2005) not purely in the rigour of methodological processes of coding, re-coding and final coding that happen outside of study setting (Watson, 2011). Along these lines Heyl (2001: 369) distinguishes an ethnographic interview from other types of interviews. Heyl argues that an ethnographer, who is present in the organization, house or tent can have a different conversation with an interviewee. I would agree with this argument, as was apparent in my 'data collection' an interview, first off, does not have to be arranged it can happen at any time which is certainly useful in terms of time but also breaks down some boundaries or perceptions. For instance, in ethnographic interviews the conversation can be more open. In some interviews there can be an imperative to look good personally or to make the organization look good through fear or commitment. When interviewing with someone who you work with day in and day out, these boundaries can break down slightly. This is partly the reason why, although I had some similar questions during the majority of my conversations, there were no set questions. Instead, I would enter into conversations around particular topics or issues that were observed or apparent. Alongside observation and interviews my data collection also consisted of the collection of documents from the organisation's intranet, reports, minutes from past meetings and marketing material.

The limitations to qualitative approaches such as observation and interviews are often portrayed in contrast to the more perceived 'scientific' quantitative approaches (Bryman, 1984). A typical argument is that qualitative studies struggle to provide grounds for generalising across cases, this is partly due to the usually small(er) sample sizes of qualitative approaches. This is perhaps even more relevant in my case as I am dealing with an extreme or deviant case (Flyvbjerg et al, 2012). Nonetheless, as Glynos and Howarth (2007) note, generalisability although problematic is possible from a post-structural perspective. There are two ways in which qualitative research can be generalised, firstly, research findings that engage and contribute to theory allow provide a theoretical account that becomes available for others to test and apply. Furthermore, although qualitative data usually comes from a single case study it can sit within an archive of studies on a particular topic which can be reinterpreted and questioned as part of larger data set.

Another limitation of qualitative research is the amount of work it involves and the amount of time it takes to gather data, materials and gain trust, for example. Put simply, this cannot be avoided and has to be done for good qualitative research to happen that pays attention to the smaller things and seeks to explore the bigger things in practice. Nonetheless, this can still be held as a limitation to qualitative research, indeed, I could have spent far less time collecting data if I had conducted a survey and sent questionnaires to various organisations. However, I believe and, hopefully, I have shown in this thesis, that an ethnographic approach provides a far more detailed look into the lived nature of sustainability which is something that survey data would struggle to provide. Linked to this level of detail is a major issue with an ethnographic approach, the danger of going native. Going native is:

"Where the observer abandons the position of analyst for identification with the people under study"  
(Seale, 2012: 249)

It relates to the divide between the observer and the participant and, to a degree, theory and practice. I believe that the line between going native and remaining the analytical and detached observer has to be tread carefully. In some cases being seen as a 'native' can be useful, moreover, understanding a 'native' and largely being accepted can be even more useful when it leads to accessing interesting empirical avenues. Without some sort of understanding of the 'natives' meanings and thus being part of their world, to a degree, what can easily happen is a form of ethnocentric or colonial renegotiation and re-articulation of meaning into a clearer (and maybe cleaner) form via an academic or familiar framework. However, there is a risk when it comes to the ethnographic need to make a situation strange or exotic (O'Reilly, 2009; Malinowski, 1922). Being in a situation over a prolonged period of time can lead to observing practices that no longer shock or intrigue the observer. Moreover, problems abound when the observer becomes so wrapped up in their participation they forget to observe and write down what is occurring (Emerson et al, 2011). There are various tactics to avoid such an eventuality (see Emerson et al, 2011 for a broader discussion). In my experience I found taking a note pad wherever you go and always remembering to write notes provided a fundamental identity-shaping tactic to avoid being absorbed into the field. Simply writing notes can be enough to maintain a sort of distance to the field, another tactic I employed was the writing of alternative stories and fictions (Linstead, 2000) which can shake up the way in which you view a situation.<sup>1</sup>

Despite these limitations and dangers I still believe a qualitative and ethnographic approach to be appropriate and fruitful for this research. In the following section I will explain some of the finer details of my study and data collection.

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<sup>1</sup> Perhaps lying under all this discussion it is possible to turn to Van Maanen (2011) who quite rightly observed, considering the complex, ambiguous and vast terrains in which an ethnographer works: "*which native?*"



## Data Collection

I participated and observed in monthly time periods working in marketing/PR, customer contact/operations, human resources, business banking, personal banking and with the investment team. This took me around the organization and as the organisation was fairly small I got to know and speak to the majority, if not, all the people in the organisation. Notes were collected in A5 recycled paper notebooks in a memo format (Emerson et al, 2011) to be elaborated on later and ultimately formed into stories and vignettes for my thesis and publications. These notes covered everything from key phrases used in meetings to conflicts, discussions, events and my own concerns, worries and feelings. Ethnographic notes were the main method of data collection, nonetheless, at the start of my time in the organisation I was asked to conduct 27 interviews within individuals about why they joined the organisation. Such interviews focussed on questions relating to how they found working at the organisation, why they joined the organisation and what they felt the organisation could achieve (see appendix for the interview list). I collected additional interviews with organisational members at various times, including quite a few with senior management, and was again asked to do smaller interviews based around the induction process that I was re-developing. The total number of interviews came to 103, some of which were only 3 minutes long, all of which provided an insight into the workings of Anuvelar. I managed to blend many of the smaller interviews into my ethnographic notes, some of which were actually not transcribed (see appendix for full list of transcribed interviews).

I made the decision fairly early in my analysis to use 39 of the larger interviews as basis for exploring some key themes that were discussed during my time at Anuvelar. The codes and issues that came out of this analysis can be seen in the appendix. It was in these interviews I was able to find and add additional empirical evidence to my ethnographic vignettes. I will

discuss the nature of my analysis in the following section after establishing the relationship theory has to my data and thus my analysis.

### Retroduction: Theory and Practice

To return to the research questions proposed earlier:

*What is the role of power in constructing particular meanings of sustainability?*

*In relation to power, how are the boundaries drawn with respect to sustainability within organisational practices?*

*What is the role of affect when examining the discourse of sustainability in a contemporary organisation?*

Both sets of questions have been derived in reference to a particular lack in the literature, they have also played an important role in the selection of relevant ethnographic methods discussed above. They also relate to a particular theoretical perspective, hence why there are terms like affect or power in the questions themselves. They are there as I am proposing that power and affect should be considered and explored in an understanding of sustainability and this contributes to the broader literature on sustainability. The practical demands of 'getting close' to the lived experiences of individuals plus the theoretical implications and understandings of what might be gleaned from this proximity are ultimately what this methodology section is set to balance. Ultimately, a cocktail is presented that would quench the thirst or needs of the questions and problems presented. This cocktail, is shaken, in this instance, through an iterative process that moves between theory and method/practice that is referred to as retroduction and is something I will explain below.

I would hasten to add that these questions do not appear through theory alone. My approach is not one of deductively testing theory out on a set arena, nor did my research findings/questions stem internally from projections of data rather, these questions came from my data in conversation with a theoretical understanding of, for example, the ambiguity of meaning, identity and affect as sensitising concepts (Blumer, 1969; Hammersley and Atkinson, 2010). This particular approach is often referred to as retroduction (Glynos and Howarth, 2007), which is a problem solving approach similar to Peirce's (1995/03, 1934) abductive reasoning where conjectures follow surprises and whereby it is necessary to work backwards to invent a plausible world or theoretical explanation. Through retroduction, the single most important criterion for admitting a theoretical explanation is that accounts for the phenomenon or problem at stake. Such a process is done by many if not all researchers during the various drafts and re-drafts in the writing process sometimes requested by a reviewer (See Pratt, 2008), sometimes demanded by ourselves or colleagues (Glynos et al, 2015). In terms of the process of research retroduction therefore encourages a logic of discovery and not one of validation. It is a process that encourages:

"...a back-and-forth character in which concepts, conjectures and data are in continuous interplay."

(Van Maanen et al, 2007: 1146)

Indeed, going further:

"If one thinks of concepts and conjectures as existing on a conceptual plane and data residing on an empirical one, the more links and the more varied the links between the two planes, the more promising the research." (Ibid).

The trick with any retroductive method, therefore, becomes that of serving two masters theory and data. Too much theory leading to abstract, conceptual and perhaps vague research and too much data causing work to be trapped within operations, minutiae and

myopia to the bigger picture. Theory, in this sense can shape method, whilst method can shape theory. Through this process, in my case, theory is brought in as a way to understand the lived character of sustainability but I do so through the empirical material in the form of stories, observations and some interviews. Retroduction, therefore, can be seen as a way of guarding against abstract theorising or mere description. Instead, the back-and-forth movement between data and theory can be seen as an act of *articulating* different theoretical and empirical elements (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) whilst noting the interwoven character of both. Glynos and Howarth (2007: 177-180) argue that, from a post-structural perspective, every social practice is articulatory as individuals constantly engage in the process of linking together different elements of their social lives in continuous and projective sequences. Ontologically, the perspective I adopt is one that agrees that things exist in the world but what is important is how they exist, how they are talked about, used and placed in respect to other objects, subjects and discourses. Crucially, this relational ontology is not one that stays still, due to the instability of language, meaning can never be permanently fixed (Derrida, 1973, 1976; Laclau, 1996, 2005) and therefore no discourse is a closed entity. Rather, discourses are perennially transformed and changed through contact with other discourses and subjectivities and are temporarily fixed in place through particular articulations.

This consideration of articulation as: “*..a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result*” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105) can be extrapolated to an understanding of social science research. In doing so it stresses an awareness that an act of articulation takes into consideration the already theory-laden, ambiguous and complex empirical domain. Retroduction, working alongside this understanding of articulation, is a way of making sense of this complexity by suggesting the researcher moves back-and-forth between theory and data that leads to the articulation of empirical and theoretical elements

relating to context and concepts. Therefore, articulation is understood as a practice performed by social scientists but also individuals under study:

“.. (A)rticulation is invoked by Laclau and Mouffe (1985) primarily to understand concrete social practices in which social actors ‘articulate’ discursive elements along the axes of equivalence or difference. The important thing to note here is that in line with the ‘double hermeneutic’, which is characteristic of social science practice, articulation is a concept that can be invoked to understand the practices being studied, *as well as the practices of social scientists themselves*” (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: 180 – my italics)

This level of reflexivity is not purely held within post-structuralist enclaves, theoretical work in ethnography more broadly relates to developing frameworks, concepts and theories that fit and are lead by your own particular research questions, studied situations and problems:

“In practice, theory choices (the rabbits we pull out of hats) rest as much on taste as on fit. A taste in ethnography, as elsewhere, results from what is no doubt a complex interaction involving ethnographers, their mentors, their readings, their disciplinary orientations, their colleagues, their students, their subjects, their friends, their critics, and their readers (increasingly their subjects too). The process is altogether de-centred and beyond the grasp of any one interested group to fully monitor or control.” (Van Maanen, 2011: 223)

My theoretical choices, I believe, provide an interesting and poignant perspective from which to explore sustainability in organisations. For example, it provides a way to ‘structure’ and explore an ambiguous concept within an ambiguous terrain. I argue these points in greater detail in the relevant sections of my thesis. For this chapter, however, I have shown that my proposed methods, questions and research strategy of retroduction are commensurate with this theoretical perspective. Furthermore, the understanding of this research as an articulation respects the need for reflexivity and the placement of the researcher within the research. In the penultimate part of this methods section I will detail the ways in which I organised this movement between theory and data.

## Data Analysis

“Ethnographers often gather mounds of field notes, but cannot capture everything because their context is so rich and their learning so vicarious. Moments of inspiration help to narrow their fields of vision, however. It might not make sense for them to code their earlier field notes, as they didn’t know what they were looking for. But they can draw patterns from their notes to juxtapose new theory with existing theory. Sometimes these patterns are illustrated through themes, and other times through stories.” (Bansal and Corley, 2011: 236)

In ethnographic work, analysis is not a final stage of the research process. Rather, analysis, thoughts pursuing areas of intrigue and ‘leads’ within the field are all part of putting together an understanding of the matter at hand. This journey is, of course, documented through artefacts, fieldnotes to yourself and punctuated by interviews that, if you are lucky, can flow from shared experiences or odd moments you want to find out about. Exploration and discovery of how sustainability worked for individuals, what it meant and more broadly what is it like to work in a sustainable bank were my main guiding principles, not necessarily pre-selected research questions. Fieldwork such as this provides a form of thematic analysis where interesting areas are explored, examined and probed. For example, one of the vignettes from paper two is derived from a series of experiences working in the credit committee team where I was part of the team that decided whether loans were approved for businesses. It took me a lot of asking and a great deal of additional knowledge to get into that room. Similarly, following “Phillip” through his happiness and frustration was an analytical choice made in the field. This is a similar practice when coding and re-coding interviews. For example, when sat facing a torrent of text on a Nvivo screen questions no doubt appear asking: am I going to follow this line of thinking? Is this a theme I have noticed in several interviews or even just one of interest? The larger and interesting themes or plots that appeared in my data became obvious contenders to be written up as vignettes although

there will still be quite a few examples stories I pursued and wrote up that did not make it into the final version of my thesis. For example, there were more contentious and difficult credit committee meetings that I could (and probably should) have focussed on. Furthermore, there were instances of cynicism and annoyance that could have been teased out in more detail and followed up in the final papers. Ultimately, I chose the vignettes that appeared in the final thesis as I felt they were useful to show and discuss themes and issues that became apparent in my field work. I wish I could have included more but I do intend on getting as much of my “data” or as many of my stories out into the public domain as possible in the future.

As mentioned previously, interviews were conducted when I first joined the organisation. It is possible to see the first order coding of these interviews in the appendices. Codes such as “Problems and Contradictions” and “Growth” came out of the interview data which would strongly resonate and substantiate the focus of my first paper. Similarly, “Emotions”, “Values”, “Spirituality”, “Bureaucracy” and “Control” would speak to and substantiate the focus of paper 2. This coding was useful to be reminded of the themes people are concerned with at Anuvelar. I made the conscious decision, however, to present vignettes and stories from my time at the organisation and to adorn these stories with quotations from the corpus of interview data.

Retroduction was used in data analysis, put simply, this related to seeing the particular stories, themes or rudimental codes through a theoretical lens, albeit one that is hardly refined and fully formed. Themes of emotional attachment, personal connection, values and commitment all spoke to an understanding of affect and fantasy within the discourse theory literature. Such an understanding allowed me to focus on the role of fantasy in structuring enjoyment, identification and investment with sustainability and my experiences, observations and interview data. This involved an engagement with the theoretical

literature, both during and after my fieldwork, and with my empirical data. In doing so it was possible to bounce ideas around that would help explain the issues I was seeing and exploring. With paper one, there is a slight difference, as I sought to bring a theoretical or academic problem to the field. I aimed to explore the issue of defining and thus understanding sustainability in practice. This problem of meaning, spoke to discourse theory and the understanding of language as ambiguous, complex and relational. In particular, I found the particular understanding of power, as something that enables, pins and partial fixes to be useful in explaining how meanings of sustainability are held and worked with and around in this work org. This was evident in the boundary practices of naming what is and what is not sustainability and also the way in which sustainability is drawn upon to make decisions regarding lending, for example. Again retroductively moving between theory and findings was a way of developing a theoretical contribution to the sustainability literature in terms of a lived understanding of sustainability.

In the following section I will introduce the three papers that make up this thesis and provide a general introduction to my topic and some of the issues I will be discussing and exploring in this work.



## Introduction

“Are Girl Scout Cookies **sustainable**”?

**Sustainability** refers to social, environmental, and economic factors that an organization addresses to provide value not only to consumers, but also to the world. Girl Scouts are very proud of the initiatives our licensed bakers report on annually in terms of their corporate **sustainability** and social responsibility. The Girl Scout commitment to “make the world a better place” is a tenet we and our licensed bakers take very seriously.”

(Girl Scouts of America, N.D.)

“Should Isis attempt to attack the embassy, those troops would likely perform combat functions. Rear Admiral John Kirby, the Pentagon press secretary, said the State Department’s “critical mission” would now receive “a more robust and **sustainable** security presence”.

(Ackerman, 2014 – *The Guardian*)

“In addition to providing the obvious benefit of growth with sustainable profits, Nissan seeks to contribute to the **sustainable** development of society.”

(Nissan’s Blue Citizenship, N.D.)

In organisational theory concerns for the natural environment saw an initial spike of interest around the late 1960s and 1970s (Aldrich, 1979; Aldrich and Pfeffer, 1976; Duncan, 1972; Emery and Trist, 1965). Although this early research hardly challenged the everyday practices of organisation with any eco-centric zeal, this initial work, at the very least, established the role that the outside world and environment has implications for an organisation. Such an appreciation stands in opposition to a closed system view (Daft, 2001)

which sees organisations as somehow sealed off from externalities like the environment. The concerns for these externalities has grown, alongside increasing pressure within politics and society and has established a need to address the natural environment more strongly within organisations. As noted by Prasad and Elmes (2005), concerns for the environment have worked their way from marginal or radical groups to academic discourses and the popular and managerial realm. Sustainability has become one of the prominent adjectives and discourses in this shift, as a response and a call to consider environmental and societal issues both in academic research and in the popular realm. Since its emergence in the 1980s as an outcome from a political interest in the impact of economic development on the environment and humanity (World Commission on Environment and Development, (WCED) 1987) sustainability and sustainable development has become a commonly used term within business organisations, politics and in society. Defined initially, and broadly, as *“..development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”* (WCED, 1987: 43) the term sustainable and sustainability appear in all manner of places within society, politics and most prominently in organisations. It is not only girl scout cookies that make claims to sustainability, if you buy a coffee, purchase a new pad of paper, visit a butchers or buy a car you will see various logos, pictures and assurances of their green, organic, fairly traded nature and thus more sustainable status. With studies suggesting that by purely labelling coffee as “eco-friendly” it appears tastier (Sörqvist et al, 2013) the good feelings of sustainability appear desirable to individuals and can even influence taste. Similarly, if you visit any website for a major organisation or corporation, you will find a similar desire for some form of sustainable target or sustainability agenda.

Some see this engagement with sustainability by an organisation as a response to supplement the governmental efforts to address the ecological problems facing the world. Alternatively, others consider it as just be a word to placate stakeholders and thus sustain

whatever the organisation is continuing to do, which is predominantly seen as making profits without a care for the environment or society. This is a debate that has been on-going in the sustainability and organisation literature and stems from the particular character of sustainability as being pro-financial but also pro-social/environmental (Livesey, 2002: 315).

On the one hand, there are scholars and writers who propose the triple bottom line approach (Elkington, 1997; Bolch, 2008; Savitz, 2014) and hence espouse the potential for profitability *and* environmental and social care through new growth opportunities and eco-efficiency (Bullis and Le, 2007) or enhancing company image and spotting new opportunities (Hart, 1995; Porter, 1991; Porter and der Linde, 1995). This, so-called, 'business case' for sustainability seeks to find a balance between the triple bottom line of *economic, social* and *environmental* balance sheets. On the other, there are critical researchers that see sustainability as a concept largely co-opted into the neo-liberal capitalist regime concerned with only one outcome, the gaining of profit and market share (Banerjee, 2003, 2007, 2011; Doyle, 1991; Levy, 1997; Stauber and Rampton, 1995). Moreover, to further fan the flames of this debate there exists a severe lack of clarity in regard to the meaning of sustainability on both sides of the argument (Banerjee, 2011; Haugh and Talwar, 2010; Livesey, 2002; Redclift, 1987). Nonetheless, sustainability remains "*an important area for investigation because of the power of the business lobby in framing the political agenda (...) and therefore influencing the environmental debate*" (Eden, 1994: 160). Although written in 1994, the importance of this engagement is still very much needed today considering the broadening powers and influence of large multi-national corporations (Dunning and Lundan, 2008; Fleming and Spicer, 2007).

In the first of three extended papers<sup>2</sup> that make up this PhD thesis, I enter into this debate through the examination and exploration of an organisation (Anuvelar Investments<sup>3</sup>) that seeks to work with sustainability as one of its core values and aims to promote change through sustainability and finance. In this sense, the case of Anuvelar Investments can be seen as an “*extreme*” or “*deviant*” case (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 230) useful for:

“..obtaining information on unusual cases, which can be especially problematic or especially good in a more closely defined sense (...) well suited for getting a point across in an especially dramatic way” (Ibid).

Mobilising the theoretical resources of discourse theory (Bridgman and Willmott, 2005; Cederström and Spicer, 2013; Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1993; Laclau, 2005) I establish the ambiguous character of sustainability as, in many respects, unavoidable due to the nature of language and discourse. I stress the role of power and hegemony as playing a crucial factor in the understanding of the meanings and practice of sustainability in a contemporary organisation. In particular, having established the boundaries of what ‘counts’ as sustainability within the field, my focus is directed towards understanding sustainability as a concept that operates within, and stems from, a fundamental antagonism between pro-financial and pro-social/environmental logics. This contributes to both sides of the argument within the conceptual literature on sustainability by offering a contextual understanding of sustainability as a political discourse that excludes, includes and quilts certain elements within the discourse. It does so, I argue, due to the ‘empty’ quality of sustainability as a discourse that stands as a privileged and powerful concept that can align various different positions and ideas. However, considering sustainability as ‘empty’ in this way, although promoting the possibility of politics through

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<sup>2</sup> Extended in the sense that they are slightly longer than what is expected of traditional journal papers.

<sup>3</sup> A Pseudonym

sustainability, also opens the concept up to various problems and pitfalls concerning its malleable nature. These issues are explored at the end of this paper and, in many respects, surface throughout this thesis.

In the second paper I address an issue that is relevant for the understanding of sustainability as contingent and 'empty' as well as contribute to the sustainability literature in regard to various calls for an engagement with the values and human factors of sustainability (Bansal, 2003; Dunphy et al, 2003; Epstein and Buhovac, 2010; Haugh and Talwar, 2010). These calls for the inclusion of values and the need to engage with individual employees are made despite the relatively small amount of research on the subject. As Bansal and Gao's (2006) review of environment/organisation research publications in top journals over the past 10 years shows, only 6% (5/79 of all journal articles) focussed their level of analysis at the individual level. Subsequently, this paper addresses a particular gap or sparseness in the literature by looking to the issues of identification and investment by individuals within a sustainable organisation. However, it also responds to an empirical observation within my research whereby many individuals at Anuvelar investments identify with the discourse of sustainability. It was seen as a source of enjoyment and purpose to them. This paper explores the process of this identification and investment through an understanding of the concept of "affect" (Laclau, 2005: 111) which is seen as a crucial part of any form of discursive articulation, understanding and, also, identification (see Cederström and Spicer, 2013; Contu, 2014 ; Laclau, 2005). Affect in this sense, relates to a certain quality or force that provides a drive or desire towards a particular identification with a discourse. In many respects this paper builds from the first paper by developing upon the ideas of discourse theory. In the first paper, the idea of sustainability is understood and worked within by individuals within an arena of power that effects its articulation and signification. The second paper takes on-board the concept of affect and its associated notions of fantasy and enjoyment in the formulation of discourse and social reality. As Laclau (2005:111) notes:

“Affect is not something which exists on its own, independently of language; it constitutes itself only through the differential cathexis of a signifying chain (....) So we can conclude that any social whole results from an indissociable articulation between signifying and affective dimensions”

In building from this point I utilise an understanding of affect as an investment by a subject and explore the role and character of the various fantasies that engage and disgust individuals at Anuvelar Investments. Such fantasies provoke an identification and investment in the discourse of sustainability. Although the beatific nature of sustainability provides a source of enjoyment for many people, the horrific fantasies that are concealed within and outside the discourse of sustainability are deemed equally as pertinent in the maintenance of a sustainable subject.

One of the major outcomes of the first and second papers is an understanding of how the discourse of sustainability at Anuvelar is positioned around what it stands against, namely mainstream organisations - be they financial organisations or other large scale ventures. This stance leads to the final and third paper in this PhD thesis and how the research produced in the first two papers can contribute to an empirical and theoretical understanding of an alternative organisation engaging with sustainability as a discourse that stands against the dominant system. The third paper in this thesis takes on a more reflective tone and offers a contribution to the debates within critical management studies (CMS) in regard to performative or engaged research (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Spicer et al, 2009) and an interest in alternative organisations (Parker et al, 2014). Drawing directly on the political theory of Chantal Mouffe (1999, 2013, 2014) and understandings of politics within discourse theory this paper details the history of antagonistic and agonistic approaches to politics within CMS. By presenting a vignette from my ethnographic study at Anuvelar I explore the many ways in which it is possible to critique certain practices performed at Anuvelar from an antagonistic perspective that seeks an immediate conflict with capitalism. However, building upon ideas of critical performativity developed by Spicer et al (2009), I argue that attempts

to engage in a more agonistic and positive fashion may be a more fruitful way of approaching critical research. In particular, an agonistic position suggests an approach to critical research that seeks to engage with an adversary and not an enemy. In much the same way in which Anuvelar Investments seek to change the system ‘within the belly of the beast’, critical research on organisations can seek a similar engagement through the explication of alternatives and the subsequent engagements this allows within education and direct involvement with organisations.

It is possible to view all 3 papers as contributing to the explication of a discourse that attempts to counter the capitalist system articulated within an “alternative” institution. I suggest that sustainability as it straddles the logics of pro-financial and pro-social/environmental is the exact form of discourse to encourage in a productive political engagement with organisations through research. However, in addition to the understanding of the political nature of my research, each paper contributes to individual pockets and gaps within the sustainability literature in organisation studies more broadly. I bring the various themes and contributions together in the conclusion of this thesis in addition to drawing attention to future research, some of the limitations within my study and some reflections on the research process.

In summary, this thesis contributes to the conceptual literature on sustainability by providing an empirically derived understanding of sustainability as an ambiguous, political and contested discourse that is dependent upon its articulation within a particular context. Having established the contested nature of sustainability it goes on to contribute to the more practical sustainability literature that sees the values of sustainability as important in organisations by exploring the identifications with, and the affective character of, sustainability. In particular, this contribution stresses the contested and political nature of sustainability as playing a crucial role in structuring an individual’s enjoyment and thus

identification. Finally, this thesis contributes to a political and practical understanding of sustainability as not necessarily an already co-opted or hijacked discourse (Milne et al, 2006; Sachs, 1999; Welford, 1997). Instead, it can be seen as an example of a concrete discourse that structures struggle and engages individuals in a political project, albeit dependent on its particular articulation.

This thesis addresses many problems within the sustainability literature, stressing the role of context and identifying the affective dimensions of sustainability as something problematic but also desirable. Fundamentally, this involves privileging the role of people and individuals as an important aspect in understanding sustainability within organisations. I am writing this introduction in the wake of over 570,000 people from 161 countries, from Syria to the USA, marching to stress the need to tackle climate change (*The Guardian*, September 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2014). In response to the rise in carbon dioxide levels by 2.5% and targeted towards the UN summit happening on the 23<sup>rd</sup> September 2014 this record breaking march speaks to the problems and worries individuals have about the future of our planet. In many respects the same passion and, you could say, fantasies of the climate marchers motivated the research you see in this thesis. It is not only politicians and nations that need to address issues concerning the natural limits of the Earth. Organisations are equally, if not more, vital in addressing the problems of climate change, pollution, decreasing bio-diversity and many other problems that are associated with human impact upon the environment. My thesis is not purely about pursuing gaps in the literature and providing persuasive arguments to fill them, it is about academics and academic endeavours contributing useful knowledge, examples and explanations that will contribute and help make this world a better place for future generations. I refer to Anuvelar Investments as an extreme or deviant case study, and it is. In a world of multi-national corporations and mainstream financial institutions it is an incredibly extreme example. But this is what makes it far more important to explore, explain and, just as importantly, to show to the world.





## Paper 1: Sustainability: Born from Antagonism and Sustained by Emptiness

It is widely understood that organisations need to supplement governmental efforts to address the ecological problems of today (Lee, 1993; Shrivastava, 1995, 2008). The Human Impact Report (Global Humanitarian Forum, 2009) reports that 300,000 people die from climate change each year and estimate this figure rising to 500,000 perishing a year by 2030. Sustainability practices are the response by organisations to such environmental and social degradation, focussing on the three pillars of sustainability: the environment, society and the economy. However, sustainability has become a much contested project or concept across various disciplines and even in mainstream discussions. For instance, sustainability is regularly discussed as meaning different things to different people (Banerjee, 2011; Haugh and Talwar, 2010; Livesey, 2002; Redclift, 1987). Although the slippage of this term is not ideal for policy creation (Banerjee, 2008) it has allowed various organisations, groups and individuals to latch onto the concept for various reasons. Whether it is the sustainability that promises the win-win-win (Elkington, 1997) of a triple bottom line (Bolch, 2008; Savitz, 2014) or enhancing company image and spotting new opportunities (Hart, 1995; Porter, 1991; Porter and der Linde, 1995). Or, conversely, if it is the sustainability largely co-opted into the predominant neo-liberal regime concerned with only one “win”, which is gaining profit and market share (Banerjee, 2003, 2007, 2011; Doyle, 1991; Stauber and Rampton, 1995). Considering the various schisms and articulations of sustainability it is evident that sustainability is a contested discourse in which political logics play an important role.

Research on sustainability within management and organisation studies has regularly developed a technical approach to sustainability. This has taken the form of models for implementing sustainability, technical diagrams for fixing unsustainable supply chain issues (Craig et al, 2011; Keating et al, 2008; Linton et al, 2007; Markley and Davis, 2007) and

stakeholder theories (Carroll and Buchholtz, 2012; Garvare, R. and Johansson, 2010; Perrini and Tencati, 2006). All of which seek to reconcile the various tensions from different perspectives. However, such an activity is very difficult, in many respects sustainability's polysemic nature, which is a logical precursor to the tensions evident, has to be maintained for it to be a viable and noteworthy discourse in organisations (see Sabadoz, 2011 for a similar discussion of corporate social responsibility). Subsequently, there is a need to explore the ontological status of the political discourse of sustainability when it is articulated as one of the main values of an organisation and holistically taken on board. If we accept that sustainability is contested and ambiguous, how are the contradictions "managed" or the fluidity understood within the organisational practices of a sustainable organisation?

This paper explores sustainability as an organisational practice and how it can be conceptualised and understood as a political discourse which is formed through practices and language. I do this by exploring the understandings and practices of sustainability through an ethnography at a sustainable financial services firm called Anuvelar Investments. I ask two questions:

*What is the role of power in constructing particular meanings of sustainability?*

*In relation to power, how are the boundaries drawn with respect to sustainability within organisational practices?*

The paper proceeds as follows. Firstly, I will review the literature concerning the conceptualisation of sustainability. I show that there is no clear definition of sustainability and that there is an intrinsic ambiguity with the term. I conceptualise this ambiguity and show how it has made it possible for sustainability to be understood as many things ranging from an ideological tool to maintain the status quo, a potentially radical concept that would challenge the status quo or the latest opportunity for profits in unexplored areas. I then

draw upon two vignettes produced during fieldwork at Anuvelar Investments, a sustainable financial services firm, to analyse the meaning of sustainability within a particular discursive context. This analysis draws out some of the conceptual and political problems in defining sustainability. Furthermore, it offers an empirically based understanding of the discourse of sustainability in contemporary organisations as a powerful notion that guides action and not just a policy or tool to “attach” to business activities as the literature suggests. Finally, in the discussion section I draw attention to the conditions of possibility for a productive understanding of sustainability. This understanding challenges as well as performs within the dominant system and can speak to the various debates within the conceptual literature on sustainability.

### Sustainability in Organisational Theory: A Contested Notion

Throughout the past 20 years sustainability has become an increasingly prevalent notion in organisations (Peterson and Norton, 2007; Bullis and Le, 2007; Banerjee, 2003).

Sustainability is seen as taking a more focussed view on ecological issues than those articulated in Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) which includes ecological issues, but places more focus on an organisation’s social outcomes and impacts (Wood, 1991). The term ‘sustainability’ or ‘sustainable’ can be seen in many places; from press coverage to consultancy firms offering sustainable services/products. Indeed, a whole industry of sustainability themed products and services has developed<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, [sustainabilityconsulting.com](http://sustainabilityconsulting.com), [terrafiniti.com](http://terrafiniti.com), [sustainability.com](http://sustainability.com), [Accenture.com/gb-en/sustainability/Pages/index.aspx](http://Accenture.com/gb-en/sustainability/Pages/index.aspx).

Similarly, academic disciplines and researchers have published many articles and papers on the topic. The Brundtland report (1987) is the starting point for many sustainability researchers:

“Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (1987: 43)

This definition was deemed feasible to operationalize in organizations, critical voices accrediting this success to privileges granted to the needs of the present, who can represent their ‘needs’ much better than those in the future (Banerjee, 2007). Ideas about sustainability have been loosely held together by this definition and maintained a connection between the environment, social equity and economics (Bansal, 2002). The Brundtland Report definition has been built upon in a variety of ways around the key words of environment, social and economic. For instance ‘People, Planet, Profit’ is a catchier term espoused by scholars who back the triple bottom line approach (Elkington, 1997; Bolch, 2008). This line of thought feeds into the proposed profitable nature of sustainability (win-win-win) that sees doing good things for the environment and society as also doing good for the balance sheet of a company. The profitability of sustainability and related activities has been discussed since Milton Friedman’s comments that *“the social responsibility of business is to increase its profits”* (1970). Such a position caused exploration as to whether social and environmental responsibility had any effect on profits. Alexander and Buchholz (1978) found no significant relationship between social responsibility and stock market performance whereas Cochran and Wood (1984) were more successful in finding a link. Overall, there has been no clear findings either way in this regard (Margolis and Walsh, 2003).

Sustainability within mainstream organisational research often takes this veiled promise of profitability as a way of arguing for sustainable practices. Even if they are not explicitly advocating sustainability based purely on this argument it still remains in the background as

a powerful force behind its articulation. Some scholars accept the possibilities of win-win-win sustainability and see *any* consideration of sustainability as preferable to none at all (Livesey and Graham, 2007). Whereas others are more radical and anti-capitalist in their intent for change and see the capitalist organisation as one part of a wider problem in society. This means “true” sustainability, and subsequently any attempts to resolve any environmental crises, is impossible within a capitalist society (Saurin, 1996). These critiques are often augmented by emotive examples of how not changing organisational practices and ultimately the economic system risks the lives of individuals in the short term (see Banerjee, 2003) and the long term (Amsler, 2009; Hawken, 1995; Naess, 1989).

In summary, these scholars highlight the antagonistic or even oxymoronic qualities of sustainability within the current economic system. Their argument stems from an understanding that true sustainability, one which would seek some form of equilibrium with nature and society, is impossible due to the uneven ways in which businesses use natural resources and pursue limitless growth (Amsler, 2009; Saurin, 1996; Tregidga et al, 2013).

Going further, some critical conceptualisations of sustainability demonstrate that there are powerful political forces at play that bend and manipulate meaning and therefore what is deemed “sustainable” activity and practice. Linking back to the previous point regarding the impossibility of true sustainability, some scholars argue that organisations and political forces have attempted to re-articulate the meaning of sustainability to paint themselves in a better light by aligning themselves with the perceived morally virtuous character of sustainability. This activity was something Levy (1997), for example, was crucially aware. In particular, Levy discusses the challenge that environmental concerns pose to the hegemonic coalition or ‘historical bloc’ (Gramsci, 1988, see Tregidga et al, 2013) of business, government agencies and the market. Scholars building on this perspective see sustainability as not simply a contrast of perspectives regarding the environment. Rather, the articulation

of sustainability is a political discourse that is dominated by a particular neo-liberal capitalist coalition and enforces a particular view of the environment. Levy (1997) argues that the discourse of environmental management and sustainability is not purely a value-neutral body of knowledge constructed by disinterested and objective academics or practitioners. Instead, drawing on Alvesson's research on management ideology (1991), the emerging considerations for the environment, of which sustainability is a part, are shaped by the extant management disciplines. A consequence of this being that the articulation and formulation of sustainable practices and sustainability prioritises and universalises managerial and corporate interests over that of workers, consumers and the broader public (see also Redclift, 1987; Springett, 2003; Macnaghten and Urry, 1998). From this perspective it is stressed that there are contradictions at the heart of sustainability when articulated in a for-profit organisation. Furthermore, that these contradictions are covered up by a particular crafting of the discourse of sustainability by management and some management scholars. Sustainability, therefore, is not purely a "tool" for organisational effectiveness, profit, prestige or whatever else is claimed of sustainability. Rather, it can be viewed as a political project to ensure the business-as-usual ethos whilst attempting to placate regulators (Newton and Harte, 1997), social movements and as a bonus attract or soothe ethically minded customers, or even employees (Fleming, 2009, Fleming and Jones, 2012).

The political contestation surrounding sustainability can be attributed to the ambiguity associated with the term. Indeed, sustainability is regularly referred to as meaning different things to different people (Amsler, 2009; Banerjee, 2011; Haugh and Talwar, 2010; Shearman, 1990; Livesey, 2002; Dryzek, 1997; Redclift, 1987). This has not stopped various definitions and understandings of sustainability being written and re-written throughout the past 20 years. For instance, in a review of definitions of sustainability White (2013) notes the top 3 most occurring words in definitions sourced through a Google search engine were: *environment, social and economic*. This research is backed up by Bettencourt and Kaur

(2011) who conducted a content analysis of more than 20,000 articles in sustainability science who found *management, environment, development and systems* with *economic and social* not far behind. Indeed the common reference point for most definitions of sustainability stick to the three, so-called, pillars of sustainability: environment, social and economic. Crucially, it is the positive relationship between all three of these aspects that allows something to be considered sustainable. Despite the key words of social, environment and economic or people, planet, profit, sustainability remains conceptually and in terms of definition ambiguous and at best contested. It is possible to understand that sustainability is focussed towards improving humanity's impact on the earth, on other people and yet still maintain some link to the market. However, the various definitions and the ambiguity that surrounds the term needs to be explored and unpacked.

Understanding sustainability as a contingent and fluid concept does not purely lend itself to be co-opted into a dominant discourse. Nor does it stand on its own as a singular beacon of change. Rather, the prevailing contingency of the discourse means that it is structured in a certain way within particular instances via instances of articulation (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Knowledge of how sustainability is maintained and structured within these instances is crucial for our understanding of what sustainability is and also what it might achieve within organisations and society (Tregidga et al, 2013). Such an exploration is not dismissing the potential for sustainability to be co-opted into the dominant discourses of neo-liberal capitalism. However, it is suggesting that sustainability is not a discourse that has always been a part of the capitalist system and does stand in opposition and can mobilise some form of struggle against capitalism.

In the following section an approach to studying sustainability as a discourse that is formed through organisational practices and language is put forward. In order to do so it is important to first establish an understanding of sustainability that does not rely on a



definition as such, rather, an understanding that acknowledges the importance of context for an articulation of sustainability and that ambiguity is impossible to remove.

### Sustainability as a Discourse: Contingency, Contestation and Context

It is important to consider definitions and the broad meanings of sustainability for policy reasons and to enable discussion and change in society. However, in order to learn about sustainability within organisations it is important to consider how sustainability is articulated within a particular context. Shearman (1990) explores the meaning of sustainability and the need for context when discussing its meaning. He notes:

“..If I were to observe a society that was continuously able to satisfy the needs of its population, or an ecosystem that was continuously able to be productive and functional, would I not be defining a specific example of sustainability and not sustainability itself? If so, then the term “sustainability” is being used to modify the context to which it is applied, with the consequence that the meaning of sustainability cannot vary from one context or perspective to the next without losing its meaning altogether.” (p2)

Subsequently, Shearman says we can discuss two methods of finding meanings of sustainability. The first is an understanding of its lexical meaning, the kind that can be found in a dictionary that uses synonyms to self-referentially explain the meaning of something. The second method relates to implicative meaning, the kind of meaning that refers to the significance or difference of something. Shearman’s example is to discuss economic development. Economic development can be defined as a process of improving social well-being through the production and acquisition of economic goods and services. To then introduce the term *sustainable* economic development the previous understanding of economic development changes. We realise a contradiction; if economic development is

unsustainable then it is not really development. "Sustainable" thus changes economic development in a grammatical sense, after all, it is an adjective, yet it also changes economic development in a conceptual sense as it introduces the idea of a contradiction:

"The "message" of sustainability linked with economic development is that the ends and means of the current conception of economic development are incompatible. If that were not the case then the term sustainable economic development would be redundant" (p2)

What can be taken from this understanding is an appreciation of the context in which sustainability is used. It is a powerful adjective that can initiate change or reinforce certain ways of doing things. When exploring sustainability in practice, within an organisation, this understanding is very useful. Instead of research turning into a hunt for sustainability, as a pre-formed discourse, it is fruitful to consider specific articulations of sustainability within a particular context. To trace and understand the ways in which the boundaries and limits of the discourse of sustainability are formed. This is a major contribution to research into sustainability. I argue that the majority of mainstream research into sustainability initiatives start from a position that accepts the ambiguity of the term, but proceed to present theories to implement and understand sustainability as if it were monolithic and stable rather than plural, polysemic and contingent. This contingency I argue, is implicit within language and is made even more complex due to the nature of language being articulated through power and therefore politics. It is for these reasons that the poststructural perspective of discourse theory will be mobilised to problematize the role of sustainability within a particular context. Such an application provides a theoretical lens that acknowledges and enables an understanding of the ambiguity and contingency of language and the role of power in producing certain articulations of sustainability in a contemporary work organisation. Before outlining the particular nuances and key terms of discourse theory I will situate the perspective within existing research that considers a poststructural understanding of

language within one of the related and similar discourses of sustainability, corporate social responsibility (CSR).

The conceptual work on CSR by Cameron Sabadoz (2011) starts, like Shearman (1990), with an understanding of how the implicative or 'in use' meaning of a concept is more important than the lexical or dictionary meaning:

"CSR's ambiguity is critical to its functioning as a lived discourse that addresses specific social concerns. The hope is thus to provide a reading that facilitates greater understanding of everyday lived CSR, by highlighting its internal logic and deep ties to the material conditions of local context" (Sabadoz, 2011: 80)

CSR can be considered as a similar discourse to sustainability insofar as it has a similar logic with regard to the role organisations can play in respect to society. Similar to sustainability, CSR lacks a coherent definition and yet is a term that many organisations use in relation to environmental and social performance (Carroll, 1999; Dahlsrud, 2008; Van Marrewijk, 2003). Moreover, like sustainability, it is a contested concept that sees social/environmental performance and financial performance come into conflict. For instance, some see CSR as an impractical fantasy (Friedman, 1970; Jensen, 2002) with others arguing that it is little more than a legitimating ideology for neoliberal capitalism (Hanlon, 2008; Shamir, 2005). Instead of arguing for a coherent definition of CSR, Sabadoz proposes that such a definition is impossible for two reasons. Firstly, a stable definition or meaning of CSR is impossible due to the relational nature of language that refuses to remain dormant and instead evolves in fluid tension to other signifiers, things and names (Sabadoz, 2011:82). Secondly, Sabadoz argues, to fix the meaning of CSR as being pro-social or pro-financial would result in the political act of supporting or denying its pro-social or pro-financial merits. As CSR is a concept that relies on and attempts to mediate both pro-social and pro-financial logics the unfixed nature of its meaning maintains this tension and subsequently is a necessary aspect

of the CSR discourse. This second point is problematic in many respects. Firstly, although I accept the tension CSR, and by extension sustainability, has between pro-social/environmental and pro-financial activities, there has to be some form of fixed meaning. Drawing on discourse theory this form of fixed meaning is partial but *appears* fixed and therefore dominant. This apparent fixity relates to the role of power in creating meaning that is powerfully articulated within language. The action which perpetuates this fixity of meaning will be discussed in the following section, to do so, however, it is necessary to quickly explore the philosophical and linguistic underpinnings of such an action. I do so by drawing on examples from Sabadoz's work and engaging with the work of Jacques Derrida (1973, 1976) which informed Sabadoz's argument.

Returning to Sabadoz's first point, that it is impossible to fix a stable definition of CSR due to the nature of language, it is worthwhile developing exactly how the nature of language creates such an impossibility. In order to do this we first need to start with the work of French linguist Saussure (1974) who conceptualised language as consisting of signs which are constituted by the unity of signified and signifiers. The signifier is the word's identity, it is the shape of the letters or sound of the utterance, for example; "d" "i" "r" "t" (pronounced: dûrt). The signified (or signification), however, relates to the physical material on the ground that is good for growing things in, with synonyms like mud (when wet), soil or muck. Saussure discussed the relation between the signifier and signified as being "arbitrary", for instance; "d" "i" "r" "t" (dûrt) may not produce the same image in a person's mind as another person.

This understanding of the arbitrary relation was further built upon by Derrida, who in a corpus of work, attacks many understandings of meaning in western civilization, linguistics and philosophy. Derrida embraces Saussure's declaration of the arbitrary relationship between the signifier and signified (Derrida, 1973) and goes further to suggest that within

wider usage of language this lag between what is said and what is meant to be said is hugely amplified. Subsequently, Derrida asserts that there is nothing foundational in language and that all signifiers are in fluid tension with one another and the modern urge to resolve such tensions is pointless and ultimately distracting. This is the position that Sabadoz's work develops as he discourages a focus on one individual meaning of CSR. Rather, the conceptual tension or "undecidability" of a concept must be experienced thus not allowing any stable meaning to develop. This notion of "undecidability" relates to the meaning of a particular signifier deriving from its relation to other signifiers (Derrida, 1976); for example, dirt is "not sky". The relational nature of language leads to what Derrida calls "différance". Combining both elements i) to differ and ii) to defer, "différance" encourages the appreciation of multiple and relational meanings that can be found in words to appear and be recognised. Moreover, "différance" reinforces the unique nature of particular articulations of signifiers; that they are different each time they are articulated. Subsequently, the meaning of a word, in this case CSR, is continually deferred to make room for the multiplicity of meanings relational to the individual utterance. This idea of difference is important as it is a fundamental aspect in the way individuals talk about and comprehend the world around them.

Sabadoz's use of Derrida to address meaning is a fruitful perspective for an exploration of a contested and ambiguous term like CSR and sustainability. Furthermore, Sabadoz addresses the need to understand discourses like CSR and sustainability as a "lived discourse"<sup>5</sup> (Sabadoz, 2011: 79). Such a focus, I believe, offers a significant contribution to the literature in both CSR and sustainability where approaches are based on prescriptive tools and models (Lockett et al, 2006). Examples of which include approaches utilising stakeholder theory (Clarkson, 1995; Freeman, 1984, Mitchell et al, 1997) which seeks to reconcile the various

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<sup>5</sup> Meaning a discourse that *"both affects and is affected by, the contexts within which it is deployed"* (Sabadoz, 2011:79) and a discourse that relates to the practices of individuals.

tensions from different perspectives. Or, for example, strategic approaches that seek to implement or embed sustainability (Dunphy et al, 2003; Epstein and Buhovac, 2010; Waugh and Talwar, 2010). These collected works accept the inherent tensions and ambiguity within sustainability. However, despite expressing the various problems involved in establishing sustainability in an organisation, they fail to explore sustainability in terms of how it is understood and worked with by individuals in an organisation within this ambiguity. To do so requires a methodology that is not seeking to implant or embed sustainability but instead seeks to explore and explain not only the meaning of a term within the wider discourse but also how that meaning is crafted, considering all its tensions and contradictions, and understood in practice.

Such a methodology could find inspiration through the use of Derrida and his concepts of undecidability and *différance* as Sabadoz develops. However, to do so encourages an understanding of meaning that overlooks the way in which, even though there are no fixed meanings, some meanings do appear more fixed than others. In order to understand how certain meanings of a concept are more fixed than others we need to introduce and consider the role of power within the differential make-up of the social. Power in this instance is not seen as negative or tyrannical, rather, power is seen as a positive force that is crucial in the constitution and reproduction of meaning and identities (see Contu, 2014).

However, this does not mean that power is not involved with inequality and uneven relations between various groups in society. For example, instances of unequal power relations relate to the understanding of sustainability as ideologically working for the dominant capitalist system such as Levy (1997) establishes. Such a relationship where differences are discursively produced as constituting unequal relations that reinforce subordination of one meaning over another relate to the role of hegemony in society. The concept and process of hegemony will be developed in more detail later in the following section.

In order to inject an understanding of power into both the understanding of meaning and an understanding of the role of discourse on individuals I propose to use a specific version of discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1993; Laclau, 2005; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Discourse theory offers a view not dissimilar to Derrida in terms of the differential nature of meaning. However, the role of power is made prominent and the effects this has on both the articulation of a discourse and the role an individual plays within this discursive arena. I elaborate and establish an approach to research utilising discourse theory in the following section.

### Discourse Theory: Articulation, Discourse and Hegemony

Discourse theory will be used as theoretical and methodological lens to explore the contextual meaning of sustainability in a specific organisation called Anuvelar Investments. Before, the background and data set is discussed, the key theoretical concepts of discourse theory will be explained and their relevance to the research question and domain made evident.

Discourse theory is a set of ideas relating to the role of discourse, negativity and signification in social analysis. Discourse theory and its synonyms of the social theory of hegemony (Contu and Willmott, 2006) or post-foundational discourse analysis (Cederström and Spicer, 2013) to name a few, draw together insights from Ernesto Laclau, Slavoj Žižek, Chantal Mouffe and various other “Essex School” scholars (See Glynos and Howarth, 2007; Howarth, 2000; Howarth et al, 2000). Although the majority of these scholars are located within political theory, the use of discourse theory in organisational theory and organisation research is rising (see Bridgman and Willmott, 2005; Cederström and Spicer, 2013; Contu et al, 2013; Contu and Willmott, 2006; Otto and Bohm, 2006; Willmott, 2005). A key

contribution to the study of sustainability in organisational theory can be found from this perspective due to the way it enables an understanding of meaning within ambiguous domains and is particularly useful in theorising contested phenomena.

A central component of discourse theory is, unsurprisingly, the concept of discourse.

Discourse is defined as:

“Any complex of elements in which *relations* play the constitutive role. This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it” (Laclau, 2005: 68)

Linking in to the discussion of sustainability by Shearman (1990) earlier, to explore sustainability as a discourse adds more theoretical weight to what he proposes as an “implicative understanding” of sustainability. Similar to the work of Derrida, drawn upon by Sabadoz (2011), in discourse theory relations and relationships between social elements produce meaning. Context is not a bucket that holds meanings like water. Rather, context can be understood as a discursive arena where meanings are derived and interwoven in relation to each other. Perhaps instead of a bucket, it might be more useful to consider the metaphor of the internet; as something that is fluid, overlapping and contingent. The contingent nature of discourse is an important aspect of discourse theory and builds from Derrida in many respects. For instance, both *différance* and undecidability point to how “*no structure of signification can find in itself the principle of its own closure*” (Laclau, 1993: 432). This understanding of language notes how all language is perennially incomplete and can never fully be essentialised or complete. This negativity reinforces the contingency in discourse as each discourse fails to incorporate this negativity or lack. Subsequently, it is this that prevents discourses from fully achieving the status of a totalised object:

“The “constitutive outside” blocks the identity of the inside but yet is a prerequisite for the construction of the inside.” (Bridgman and Willmott, 2006: 6)



It is because of this negativity or “constitutive outside” that objects (for example concepts, groups, organisations) can be constructed differently in and through discourse and also why these objects are never fixed. Discourse theory is a form of analysis that thematises antagonism and negativity as “*constitutive of the social*” and “*places politics at the centre of its ontology*” (Contu and Willmott, 2006: 1772). Indeed, this negativity is fundamentally important for what can be called reality (Contu and Willmott, 2005). Therefore, taking this ontological understanding into consideration, discourse theory is a theoretical perspective that allows the deconstruction of reality based on this premise of contingency and flux. It is pertinent to note that this understanding of discourse is not purely related to language and speech. It is argued by Laclau (Bhaskar and Laclau, 2002:81) that both language and practice follow a similar logic and that the term discourse could be called practice without any conceptual problems. Both language and practice are determined relationally and acquire meaning through their difference from others signs (in language) and practices (within the social) (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105-109). As Laclau notes:

“(Discourse).. involves the articulation of words and actions, so that the quilting function is never a merely verbal operation but is embedded in material practices..” (Laclau, 2005: 106)

Subsequently, we see that language and practices both operate through difference. These differences are a condition for the constitution of what we can comprehend and communicate (Contu, 2014: 5). Quilting, in this instance, refers to the instances where discourses are articulated in a certain way, in referent to each other. For example, how the discourse of finance becomes quilted by the particular meanings of sustainability and can be understood as sustainable finance. This takes a previously understood discourse and sees its meaning change due to the adjectival label and the meanings and practices associated with sustainability.

In summary, so far we have an approach to discourse (language and practice) that is not too dissimilar to Derrida. Inasmuch as discursive context is important, discourse is seen as contingent and meanings therefore are multiple and in tension with the various other signifiers within a certain lexicon and arena. Where discourse theory differs to the Derridean idea of discourse is in its consideration of power as a productive force of meaning through the notion of hegemony and articulation. As Bridgman and Willmott note:

“Identity and objectivity... are negatively constituted, incomplete, and ultimately unstable but are temporarily solidified through processes of hegemonic articulation” (2006: 6)

The role of hegemony and hegemonic articulation point to the unavoidable power inherent in discourse. For example, instances where discourses appear to have fixed a certain meaning and appear to have created a stable position over a period of time are instances of a hegemonic articulation. Discourse theory encourages a problematization of this potentiality. It does so by encouraging a consideration of the dimension of power namely the process of hegemony and hegemonic articulations that attempt to fix meanings in a particular way. Considering the contingency evident in all reality, organisations and even society are accomplished through articulatory practices which are defined as:

“..any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result” (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985: 105).

The relatively stable nature of these entities relate to the process of hegemonic articulation. Articulatory practices constitute the social as positives creating *“specific meaningful identities and objectivities which develop in irremediably incomplete, antagonistic relation to what they aspire to name”* (Contu and Willmott, 2006:1772). This temporary fixing of specific positivities, such as an understanding of sustainability as a win-win potentiality, is the outcome of this power-infused hegemonic articulation. Hegemony relates to the suturing of undecidables into identities and objectivities (Ibid), be that a group, society or an

organisation. The role of hegemony and the notion of suture (stitching, holding flesh together) relates to the antagonism and negativity placed at the centre of the social. This negativity was understood by Derrida, discussed previously, when he considered the undecidability of meaning and his subsequent understanding of *différance*. Derrida acknowledged the radical undecidability found in all structural arrangements; however, discourse theory has built upon this understanding to consider the role of power in structuring meaning *as if* it was objective and not contingent. This explains how, over time, identities, objects and discourses achieve an “objective presence” (Laclau, 1990: 34) in spite of the radical contingency or undecidability within which this presence was formed. Not only does this explain the process of hegemony it also provides a theory to deconstruct hegemonic discourses and structures of meaning based on empirical data.

One final theoretical concept that will be introduced relates to the power of hegemonic articulations. So far the process of hegemonic articulation has been explained, that it sutures over contingency in a way that conceives a discourse or object as “objective” and stable. What is crucial to this process are specific anchoring points or “empty signifiers” (Laclau, 1996) that hold elements of discourse together. Empty signifiers are empty of any particular content, in other words, they do not necessarily correspond with the thing the empty signifier names. An example of this is to be found in Kripke (1980) cited in Žižek (1989) who discusses the naming of gold. His argument states that even if all the qualities originally attributed to gold were wrong, we would still refer to gold as gold. What this points to is that the naming of gold as ‘gold’ establishes its identity. It does not depend on the qualities or content that it represents.

Moreover, the power within empty signifiers as part of the process of hegemony grant the capacity to overdetermine other elements within discourse. This means that elements of discourse, regardless of whether they are defined explicitly or not, gain a specific meaning

by being tied with an empty signifier. Thus the empty signifier acts as a power-filled adjective, singular notion or even a person (Laclau, 2005: 104-105) that affects the meaning of elements it is exposed to or articulated within. For example, sustainability is an excellent example of an empty signifier. As was shown earlier in Shearman (1990) the adjectival label 'sustainable' added to the term economic development introduces a contradiction into its meaning and subsequent understanding. The drawing on this empty signifier is different to other adjectives like 'poor' economic development or 'successful' economic development as it encourages a step out of what economic development is and into a chain of signification.

The theoretical resources identified in this section enable me to explore sustainability as a discourse and practice within a differential understanding of language. Alongside this differential understanding is a focus on the role of power and the idea of hegemony which both relate to attempts to fix the meaning of certain discourses within difference. As all language is contingent, an understanding that is notable in the ambiguous character of sustainability within the literature, discourse theory allows sensitising concepts and a theoretical outlook to pursue the ambiguity of sustainability within a particular context. In particular, discourse theory's focus upon the act of articulation and the power of an empty signifier that acts as a unifier of meaning offers an explanatory tool to address my first research question:

*What is the role of power in constructing particular meanings of sustainability?*

Moreover, as discourse theory considers the contingent nature of language and the perennial fluidity of meanings it is useful to examine tensions and antagonisms within an organisation. This strength addresses my second question:

*In relation to power, how are the boundaries drawn with respect to sustainability within organisational practices?*

Over-riding these two specific research questions is the need to examine the contradictions, tensions and antagonisms present when sustainability is articulated within a contemporary organisation. To address these questions I conducted an ethnographic study at a sustainable financial services firm. I discuss my methodology and data set in the following section.

## Methodology and Data Set

The empirical material referred to in this article was produced during a 6 month ethnography looking into sustainability and organisational practices. Data collection was conducted in the summer of 2013 at Anuvelar Investments<sup>6</sup>, an organisation that invested in sustainable ventures. In this section I will introduce the setting, explain my data collection methods and analytical process before describing the empirical material utilised in this article.

## Research Setting and Access

Anuvelar Investments is a relatively small financial services organisation (90 staff) based in the UK. Anuvelar invest in sustainable ventures throughout the UK. Operating in the middle of a city centre their investment model is very simple; receive savings from customers and then invest this money into sustainable projects transparently to gain interest for savers. Their investments team is structured around three different groups: organic farming and trade, renewable energy and arts and culture. As stated all investments made are completely transparent, so customers may check on investments in their local area and can also be reassured that no cluster bombs or hydrocarbons will be funded by their money.

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<sup>6</sup> A pseudonym.

Anuvelar do not just facilitate investments, they have experts within each market to help businesses with useful contacts and establish networks for small organisations.

Access was requested by email to the managing director (MD) followed by continued liaison with the MD and his team regarding my presence and the type of access needed. A report and my labour on various projects were provided in return for access to the site.

Given Anuvelar's position as a sustainable financial services organisation the majority of the people working for the organisation appeared to align themselves strongly with sustainability. This was observable during lunchtimes, where vegetarianism (a common environmentally aware choice) was popular. In the lunch area, organic fruit, sourced from a customer, sat out on the counter next to the Fairtrade coffee machine. On a shelving unit were books on the economy, the environment and sometimes books that blended the two, as Anuvelar were trying to do. All of the furnishings at Anuvelar's office, from desks to lighting and from artwork to paint, are logged in a booklet entitled *"Showcasing our values"*. In this book every piece of furniture is displayed and on the back of each picture are its sustainability credentials:

**‘Desk Chair’**

Manufactured in Ireland, designed by Diffrient.

54% recycled content (32% post-consumer, 22% pre-consumer)

93% recyclable

Shipped in 85% recycled packaging where blankets can’t be used.

Seat fabric is manufactured in the UK. 75% wool, 25% nettle fibres, coloured using non-metallic dyes and 100% compostable.

Fabric looms are powered by green electricity from...

(from “*Showcasing our Values*” booklet)

The furnishings of the building are meticulously planned by a team with the sole purpose of showcasing the values of Anuvelar, the following is taken from the front page of the booklet:

‘A great deal of planning, thought and research has gone into every element of our new building.

We’ve rigorously challenged suppliers and ourselves in our choices to ensure that everything brought into the building has a conscious decision behind it. We’ve thoroughly questioned designers and manufacturers, and had many interesting dilemmas and intense discussions on what we should allow into our home. We’re really pleased with the result – a building that proudly showcases innovation, excellence, sustainability and entrepreneurship’

As is evident, Anuvelar is not a normal organisation that engages with sustainability in particular departments. In that respect the research setting offers a microcosm of sorts, showing what sustainability could look like if it became one of the key aspects of an organisation’s practices<sup>7</sup>. To use an anthropocentric image one could say that Anuvelar eats

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<sup>7</sup> See Parker (2014) for further discussion.

and breathes 'sustainability', from IT services to investments and embodies the discourse of sustainability.

## Data Production

Data collection consisted of observation (799 hours in total) which were recorded by the writing of fields notes that included memos and voice recordings that I would later develop upon outside of the study setting (Van Maanen, 1988). Artefacts such as reports, secondary information about the organisation and minutes from meetings were also collected into the corpus of data. 39 interviews were conducted, however, the majority of the data used in this paper was produced through observations.

My focus at the start of my fieldwork was to understand the practice surrounding sustainability. Furthermore, I was aware, as I have shown in the literature review of this paper, that sustainability was by no means a fixed and stable concept. Subsequently, I sought to understand how sustainability was discussed, how it came to be used to legitimate certain actions and also how it acted as a force for behaviours within the organisation. Although there are no prescriptions for methods from a discourse theory perspective, an approach that accesses the discursive context of particular articulations is beneficial for a relational understanding of, in this case, sustainability (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The choice of ethnographic research was due to this need to get close to the action. Being (and preferably working) in an organisation, as opposed to questionnaires or discourse analysis of official documents, encourages participants to provide and drive meanings (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). The role for the researcher is then to understand and plot and analyse these participant-lead understandings and meanings with reference to theory. It is this analytical process that I will now go on to show.



## Analytical Process

As is understood in ethnographic work, analysis is not a final stage of the research process. Rather observations, reflections and field-notes are already a form of analysis as part of constant process of reflection (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2010). This on-going analysis, which did continue after my time in the field, was based on an iterative process of reading and scrutinising my field-notes (see Contu, 2014: 8). Whilst at the same time I would reflect upon what emerged in reference to the field and theory. This retroductive process of moving back and forth between theoretically informed 'sensitising' concepts and the field allowed a form of middle-range theorising to manifest<sup>8</sup>. Retroductive analysis is different to an inductive approach to research which seeks to build from the data outwards and a deductive approach that operates from theory inwards through hypothesis testing (Glynos and Howarth, 2007: chapter 1). In many respects retroduction is comprised of both an appreciation for the richness of data and the relevance of theory that is seen as a form of explanation.

Given the focus on understanding sustainability in context I identified key practices, behaviours and names attributed to how individuals understood sustainability at Anuvelar. For instance, as will be shown in the following empirical material, the naming of what is not sustainable is a crucial aspect in understanding what it might be in practice. Subsequently, using Nvivo 10 software I located and listed nodes relating to comments about "other" firms that were not considered sustainable or the sort of business Anuvelar would invest in or, for instance, expect their employees to buy their lunch.

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<sup>8</sup> For a full discussion of retroduction and its uses with discourse theory see Glynos and Howarth (2007, Chapter 1)

Having now explained the theoretical and methodological aspects of my approach I now move on to my analysis. In the next section, I draw upon the theoretical insights from discourse theory and focus upon two vignettes taken from my ethnographic notes.

### Sustainable Milk, Profits and Meetings

In the following material I will provide vignettes that establish and show the complex character of the meaning and use of sustainability in a contemporary organisation. The vignettes provide sufficient detail of the nuances of naturally occurring data (Silverman, 2007) that were observed and recorded during my time at Anuvelar Investments.

Presentation of data in the form of vignette was chosen as it shows the 'lived' nature of the discourse of sustainability and gives the reader a feel for the setting of the research and the people at Anuvelar. Furthermore, ethnographic vignettes are commonly used in organisational theory research (Alvesson, 1994; Forester, 1992; Michel, 2011) due to the perceived problems using interview data and surveys (see Silverman, 2007). Despite the common use of ethnographic methods, presenting ethnographic work can be a difficult practice (Van Maanen, 1988). Too easily a vignette may give a false sense of the researcher being a neutral observer (Clifford and Marcus, 1986). I contest, that it is not possible to be neutral when conducting and displaying ethnographic work. As with other methodological choices, by choosing to produce data in a certain way you subsequently lose the opportunity to produce and present field data in alternative ways. Despite these caveats, considering the research question and the focus upon sustainability practices I believe vignettes based upon ethnographic work are a suitable method for providing and representing relevant data.

The following vignette introduces the tensions apparent in sustainability when it is articulated in a for-profit organisation and establishes some of the boundaries around what may count as sustainability. It does so by looking to what is excluded and what is accepted into this particular discourse of sustainability.

### Vignette 1: Milk

*The first vignette regards the events that happened whilst I was working alongside the credit team in the investments department. The office had 3 floors and on the top floor was a shared communal space where the majority of Anuvelar workers ate their lunch. It had a coffee machine, fruit, fridges and plenty of seating. In addition to this communal space, at the end of the room there were a cluster of meeting rooms and a large space used when the organisation gathered together on a Monday morning and it was sometimes used internally and externally for conferences. On this particular day there had been a meeting of organic farmers.*

*I was sat at my computer when a manager from the credit team came down and angrily walked to the tea station around the corner from my desk. I stood up and walked over to speak to him, armed with a question about the work he had given me but also curious as to what had annoyed him. Although the expression of positive emotions were prevalent at Anuvelar, anger and annoyance were less common than my previous experiences in offices. So I decided to investigate this abnormal occurrence.*

*I join him at the fridge as he pulls out two 4 pint bottles of organic milk and gets a cup. I make a joke suggesting he may need a bigger cup. He responds: "I've just been upstairs to the coffee machine and went to change the milk." The coffee machine was one of those automatic coffee machines that had a separate chilled compartment for milk where a tube is placed in the bottle to draw milk out into your latte or cappuccino.*

*“Someone has bought some cheap nasty milk from Tesco for the coffee machine” he continues with a stare that asks me to fill in the gaps that the language he uses does not provide. “Oh dear” I respond.*

*He continues, “What if the farmers had seen this? – What does this say about our values? And what about the reputational loss?”*

*“Yea.. Oh dear.. Any idea who did that?” is my response.*

*“Someone who doesn’t care, I imagine”. And with that, the credit manager went back upstairs, organic milk in hand.*

### Reflections: Is it Milk or the Money? – Establishing the Boundaries and the Antagonism within Sustainability

This vignette is a starting point to delve into an examination of sustainability. This was not a specific discussion on ‘what sustainability is’, although such conversations were useful, this was a direct response to something i.e. using non-organic Tesco milk, that was deemed non-“sustainable”. In this particular organisation, organic was a crucial investment area and also a movement that the majority of the employees at Anuvelar supported. Subsequently, it is possible to understand the signifier ‘Organic’ as a signifier that is articulated within sustainability.

In many respects this vignette is centred around the breaching of an unspoken set of values about what is expected at Anuvelar, namely organic milk, which honours a values commitment and a financial relationship with organic farmers. What was interesting about the credit manager’s response was the blended rationality of both business and ethical concerns, something that perhaps speaks to the business cases built around sustainability. In

the first instance the manager was disgusted by the non-organic nature of the milk. Secondly he outlined his concerns about how it was bought from Tesco an evil “other” that was part of long list of organisations that were vilified regularly for not being sustainable and damaging society and the environment. This is an important instance of boundary setting and is an example of how discourses, organisational practices and space are organised discursively through a combination of elements but also the rejection of others.

In the first instance, we see disgust and anger that someone would have brought non-organic milk into the organisation. The openness of this disgust was observable, it was not just an individual upon a moral high ground. It was an overt display that stemmed from a values alignment and a shared understanding with individuals at Anuvelar. Someone, was told to get some milk and had inadvertently breached a norm by buying non-organic milk. Other Anuvelar co-workers who I spoke to about the incident were equally concerned and shocked. As petty as it may appear, this breaching of a norm points to the prevalence of a certain “us” for Anuvelar co-workers. This “us” stands for more than just milk preference as I will go onto show in the following sections.

The second part of the credit manager’s reaction is a rejection of an “other”, the naming of a “them”, as opposed to the “us” made evident previously. Milk from Tesco, the “other” is termed “*cheap and nasty*” it does not fit with the values of Anuvelar it is wrong, both from a farming perspective (being non-organic and overly relying upon anti-biotics) and also from a financial perspective (prioritising growth and profits over social and environmental sustainability). The milk in the automated coffee machine is a symbol of the “other”. Its presence symbolises something much more than difference as Tesco was a firm deemed to be operating in an unsustainable way by Anuvelar co-workers. So, in part, this articulation of sustainability relies on a values commitment to a different understanding of business, evoking sustainability as it highlights a contradiction, as discussed earlier. It also shows that

there are limits placed on what can count as sustainable in reference to what is not sustainable which subsequently affirms a strong commitment to what should count as sustainable<sup>9</sup>. Considering this activity as a political issue, as there are, ultimately, no stable meanings there are also no stable lines of conflict. Subsequently, the rejection of Tesco (in this instance) as an “other” and the disgust at the lack of organic milk which relates to understanding of some form of “us” allows a fluid boundary to be draw between different political and organisational camps. Despite the fluidity there still remains a fixed understanding of what is expected, a degree of fixity around a particular group of understandings. This degree of fixity, in this instance, is derived through the role of power within a hegemonic articulation of sustainability.

The final aspect of the credit manager’s actions rest upon the potential for “reputational loss” for Anuvelar. This reputational loss relates to the negative effects this faux pas might have to a financial services organisation that is seen as a hub for sustainable enterprise. This is an important issue as the pull that this branding and organisational identity enables, in some cases, customers and businesses taking less preferential interest rates in comparison to some of their mainstream competitors. Subsequently, the non-organic milk could cost Anuvelar money as it points to a potentially inauthentic placement within the discourse of sustainability. Not that Anuvelar could be shunned or “othered” as much as Tesco, but that they were flirting with the boundaries and, therefore the limits, of a particular articulation of sustainability.

The understanding of sustainability as both value filled and enabling profit is at the core of many definitions and mainstream understandings of sustainability. Moreover, as shown in reference to the literature, these two elements can be seen as contested and at odds with

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<sup>9</sup> Explored in more detail with reference to the affective pull towards sustainability in Parker (2014)

each other. Certainly, it is sustainability in all its constructive tension that is evident in this vignette.

On the one hand, one has values that support and frame sustainability as being contra to the money oriented and economies and scale enabled big corporates. On the other, there is still the necessary goal of profit and maintenance of market share, to ensure survival. This points to a productive antagonism between the two in terms of their understanding and therefore meaning. A contestation that provides the basis for a functioning discourse of sustainability where the pro-social/environmental values clash with the supposed pro-financial values of sustainability. What is important to explore is how this implied antagonism is sutured or bridged. This is where the role of power becomes important to understanding the discourse of sustainability and the antagonism it seeks to endure.

Antagonism is a fundamental concept in discourse theory and concerns the collision and sometimes collusion between two or more discourses that structure meanings in certain and different ways. As discourses can never be fully stable they are forever in conflict with other discourses that attempt to define and articulate reality, concepts and guidelines for social action differently. The only way of defining this context is through an understanding of its limits of discourse and as such limits are indiscernible (Laclau, 1990, 2005) antagonisms are instances where the limits of symbolisation appear. The reason behind this being that antagonism represents, in this instance, a space whereby two forces meet which have very few discourses commensurable with each other. Subsequently, within the antagonistic middle ground, between pro-social/environmental and pro-financial logics is where the business of meaning and politics manifests as each discourse attempts to articulate and rearticulate concepts, ideas and practices in a certain way. Sometimes these articulations and rearticulations can be noticeably different from each other; in other situations they can be very similar. As there is no “monopoly” over the signs we all share (Mercer, 1992), signs

may be disarticulated from one discourse and appropriated into another that might be oppositional to the former. Rigid categories or structures cannot account for this fluidity and discourse theory encourages an understanding that accepts the constitutive ambivalence of the various elements that make up any one articulation of discourse. What it is important to consider, therefore, is the role of power and the process of hegemonic interventions within antagonisms that seek to reconstitute unambiguity by means of power, articulation and force (Laclau, 1993: 282).

The example given in this vignette provides a clearly identified “other” (that which is not sustainable, bad for the environment) and a derived understanding of an “us” (organic, sustainable, doing good) which adds up to an articulation of a discourse of sustainability within Anuvelar Investments. On top of this, however, is the over-riding antagonism regarding profit and the values within sustainability. Antagonism is the very condition of the political as the limits of discourse emphasise the always present possibility that the differential relationship objects, people and language and the limits of discourse can turn into an antagonism. For instance, is the role of profit as a pro-financial element becoming dominant and therefore is sustainability in this instance just another sales strategy? Or is sustainability a concept and movement that is able to change the way profit and returns are viewed? These two questions point to the unfixed concepts and practices that are “at stake” in the throngs of powerful articulations. In this particular case, it is possible to see the pro-social/environmental aspects of sustainability articulating the more traditional pro-financial goal of profits and returns. The next vignette will present this antagonism in more detail as it takes us to a specific situation where the business of Anuvelar, providing loans and funds to organisations, meets the values of sustainability. Doing so allows us an opportunity to disentangle the interconnected discourses and therefore meanings that are present when sustainability is aimed towards business outcomes and to show sustainability as a powerful modifier of particular practices, namely, an empty signifier.



The understanding of sustainability as an empty signifier shows how sustainability allows a different articulation and therefore understanding of traditional business and its elements of profit, market share and, specifically for the banking industry; returns on investment and security. This articulation remains possible due to the antagonism that stems from both the contingent and contested nature of sustainability in referent to discourses that seek to articulate and rearticulate its meaning. What will take centre stage in the analysis, however, is the productive manner in which sustainability is articulated within this financial setting.

## Vignette 2: Risk, Profits and Sustainability

*In this vignette the focus is upon two credit committee meetings I was able to attend and the investments team involved in these meetings. The meetings related to investments the bank was considering making, updates to current investments (requests for overdraft extensions or another loan for example) and in some cases dealing with problem cases that were going to cost Anuvelar money due to failure on the investee's part.*

*Credit committee meetings involved three people from the investment side of Anuvelar, the credit and risk manager, a note taker from the credit and risk team and usually the head of the investments team as a chairperson, although in some cases a senior relationship manager would chair the meeting. As mentioned the meetings related to new proposals from organisations Anuvelar invested in and also the reviewing of existing companies who are at risk of bankruptcy, or on their way towards problems. The three people would remain in the room on the top floor whilst different relationship managers, who deal with the particular*

*organisations' potential or existing investments, would walk up to discuss and usually advocate these changes or articulate opportunities for investment.*

*The credit and risk manager was a meticulous and likeable character who had arrived at Anuvelar from a mainstream banking organisation some time ago. On his desk sat three juggling balls with "yes", "no" and "maybe" on them. I asked why this was the case one day: "every risk manager needs something like this. Some have dice, I have these. If I am struggling with a decision, the first one I drop gives me my answer" he says to me smiling. I never got to see these balls in use and nor do they join us in the credit committee meeting, which is a shame. The second person in the meeting is the note-taker, in this instance, it was me. The third person in the meeting was the head of investment, an incredibly charismatic man who was also incredibly committed to sustainability.*

*I walk into the room, before me is a beautiful and solid looking wooden table, full of blemishes and is made from reclaimed wood. The chairperson and the risk manager are sat on one side of the table with a TV monitor on the back wall and the walls around the meeting room are all glass apart from on one side where there is an external wall with a large window. I sit on the same side of the table as the two others in the room and pull out the pack of documents relating to each proposal and review that was sent around on Friday afternoon. I had spent all weekend trying to understand each document and had made many notes. The first organisation we were looking at was a renewables company who wished to gain a loan to expand their existing wind turbine sites, they needed a significant amount of money to do so. The front page of the document outlines the previous debt of the organisation and the proposed amount for the new loan, or in other words exposure to Anuvelar. In this particular case they have no previous debt and had a fairly healthy credit rating and the interest margin charged by Anuvelar had been identified. Below these financials is a matrix detailing risk issues:*

<i><b>Risk</b></i>	<i><b>Management</b></i>	<i><b>Age</b></i>	<i><b>Solvency</b></i>	<i><b>Debt Service Cover Ratio</b></i>	<i><b>Profit</b></i>	<i><b>Market</b></i>
1	<i>Strong, diversified management</i>	<i>&gt;6 yrs</i>	<i>Rating &gt; BBB</i>	<i>&gt;2,5</i>	<i>No loss in the past 5 years</i>	<i>Mature and Diversified</i>
2	<i>Strong CeO plus separate full time financial employee</i>	<i>4-6 yrs</i>	<i>&gt;30%</i>	<i>1,5-2,5</i>	<i>No loss in the past 3 years</i>	<i>Stable and Diversified</i>
3	<i>Experienced management, Key person risk</i>	<i>2-4 yrs</i>	<i>10-30%</i>	<i>1,1 – 1,5</i>	<i>Max 1 year of loss in the past 3 years, strong start ups</i>	<i>Small and Poorly diversified</i>
4	<i>New management, poor management, management accountant change</i>	<i>0-2 yrs</i>	<i>0-10%</i>	<i>&lt;1,1</i>	<i>At least 1 year of loss in the past 3 years, overdue payments, weak start ups</i>	<i>Dependent on a small market, new market or new product</i>
5	<i>Bad management</i>	<i>0 yrs</i>	<i>&lt; 0%</i>	<i>&lt;1</i>	<i>More than 90 days overdue payments</i>	<i>Market down</i>

*(From credit proposal form)*

*This grid was used to determine overall risk to Anuvelar with each column being shaded in on the relevant finding and a number being given in each column for the particular organisation under review. Underneath this table is an area of the form called 'Impact' followed by the words Cultural, Social, Environmental and Unique and Scalable. This was a place to note how the organisation fits into Anuvelar's values and also why investing in this organisation would not upset the customers whose money they were investing, if they found out.*

*Turning the page there are recommendations from the relationship manager, conditions of the agreement and an outline of the security the organisation has, in case the worst comes to the worst and they cannot pay back the loan. In this case it is the land, machinery and the technology already owned by the company. Following this is a lengthy report from the relationship manager who specifies that this organisation "meets the criteria for environmental and renewable organisations that we would like to support". The report then goes on to detail background, sustainability/impact, proposal, management, financials (recent and projected), security, risks and future funding opportunities. The document ends with a little more information from the organisation seeking investment and a balance sheet and profit and loss account for perusal.*

*The relationship manager knocks on the door and is ushered in with a wave of the hand and a joke by the head of investments. The relationship manager responds with another quip with the head of investments responding again. Despite the icy cool appearance of the risk manager who keeps his head down reading the document, the atmosphere in the room brightens up and I feel slightly less nervous. The relationship manager sits down and we start to discuss the prospect of loaning money to the company. As expected in a credit committee meeting, talk of risk, exposure, projected profits, interest, cash and market dominate the discussion.*

*Sustainability is not explicitly discussed, it does not appear at all really, it is queried at one point and the relationship manager simply says, “yes it fits our values”, and we get back to whether the renewables organisation can make enough money to make this viable. There is a human touch to all of this, however, something that the head of investment talked to me about several times. The decision as to whether this venture is something that Anuvelar would support is made long before the proposal appears in this meeting. The relationship managers in this group, who are responsible for developing business and working with the companies Anuvelar supports, are well aware of the type of organisations that are suitable. There are policy documents for each investment team and a deep understanding of the sort of organisations that would not be suitable. This understanding is informed firstly by the company-wide value of sustainability and the various criteria informing this value. Examples of which differ between investment teams, within the renewables investment team there is obviously a focus upon purely renewable energy and not fossil fuels or energy that is produced that damages the environment. This value of sustainability is reinforced by the value and commitment to transparency that links the investments of Anuvelar with their customers. So, for example, when in a credit committee meeting everyone is aware that whatever investment decisions are made they will be made readily available to anyone who is interested via their website.*

*“Have you gone out and seen the guys?” asks the head of investments, “have you looked them in the eye and got a feel of who they are?” the relationship manager responds: “yes, they are good people”.*

*We talked about the renewables market and the various criteria for a successful loan. This criteria was navigated easily by the members of the meeting who have done this every Monday since they started working for Anuvelar. They are probably the same criteria used at*

*the risk manager's previous employer, in fact. This discussion went on for thirty minutes and was finally resolved and the loan was agreed.*

### Reflections: Business as Usual? Or A New Articulation Against the Hegemony of Finance?

This meeting provides an interesting and detailed insight into the antagonism that spans both the pro-financial and pro-social/environmental elements of sustainability. In the first part of the vignette, there is a grid to gauge risk and exposure alongside typical financial tools such as a profit and loss account and balance sheet. All of which are used to make a decision about whether or not a renewables company gets a loan which in turn leads to Anuvelar gaining a return via interest and delivering some of these returns to their customers in the form of interest on their savings. This is a historic model of finance and banking and by extension capitalism with owners of capital gaining interest on their wealth. Although I was not seeing the selling of derivatives and the various other complicated mathematical sleights of hand associated with mainstream banking, the activity was that of a mainstream banking tradition utilising financial concepts such as returns on investment, security and balancing risk. All this was done in the pursuit of creating value through other institutions creating value. If this was the only activity happening within the investment team the antagonism discussed in the previous section would not appear in this instance. The hegemonic power of a pro-finance discourse, whether it is called capitalism, neo-liberalism or free market economics would have sutured the middle ground of the antagonism so much so that it almost ceases to be a conflict. It is instead, business as usual, adhering to the dominant mode of finance. If sustainability was used in this context it would be a surface level concept used to manipulate the perception of an organisation's practices. As is evident, however, this was not the case, despite the fact that if an individual were to

observe this meeting, without knowing anything else about the organisation, it might not look vastly different from other financial institutions.

Although sustainability is not discussed directly during the meeting it echoes throughout in the decisions that have been made in the past and the shared values and worldview of the individuals at Anuvelar. These are the same shared values that were negatively breached by the purchase of the wrong milk and were established contra the “them” or “other” of the mainstream (signified by Tesco in the previous vignette). In addition to the banking terms (return on investment, security, risk, market share, profit and loss) there was a discussion of a personal touch and the aim of checking the potential investment shared similar values to Anuvelar. Over-riding this discussion was an understanding of what Anuvelar stands for; namely sustainability and enabling sustainable organisations through finance. We can therefore start to discuss the role sustainability plays in modifying financial concepts like returns on investment, security and balancing risk in this instance. To do so it is worthwhile returning to the concept of antagonism and the idea that there of the antagonistic middle ground between the pro-social/environmental and the pro-financial elements of sustainability. Within this undecidable terrain, there exists the conditions of possibility for privileging certain concepts to stand in as a powerful signifier and term that draws concepts together whose relations are derived from differences into an equivalent discourse. This powerful signifier, responsible for the privileging of certain concepts is termed an empty signifier (Laclau, 1996, 2005). In a typical financial institution the empty signifier that modifies the meaning and purpose of credit committee meetings would be a term like profit or shareholder value. In the setting explored in this vignette there is a different hegemonic force that draws meanings and practices together, namely sustainability.

Although the practices in this vignette are not particularly radical, the intent and the projects that gain investment would be considered radical by the majority of the mainstream

financial institutions. It is not that, in this instance, the renewables firm is a credit risk or not going to be a profitable venture. Rather, the profits it creates would not be enough or quick enough for a mainstream bank. However, with sustainability as a modifying term for Anuvelar, it shifts the attention away from purely profit to consider areas of cultural, social and environmental impact that offer a certain uniqueness at the expense of the pursuit of profit. Similarly, when dealing with risk, there are metrics to determine how risky an investment appears to be. However, if that investment is adding sufficient value to society and the environment, be it innovative approaches to renewable energy or rooftop gardens then such ventures are supported. Such actions are premised upon sustainability and a venture's contribution to society, not their contribution to the balance sheet of Anuvelar. Although risk has to be taken into consideration, instances where riskier ventures received investment were not done so for more profits in a typical "high risk high yield" understanding. Rather, they were invested in due to the "high yield" and the potential higher benefit and reward for the environment and society. Risky investments in innovative organisations, can, and Anuvelar would attest have, introduced a knock-on effect within society, encouraging similar sustainable enterprises. This intent is premised on the profitability of an investment but, instead of a pursuit of purely profit and returns, seeks a return for the environment and society more broadly.

Understanding sustainability as an empty signifier and a modifier enables us to see that, although concepts and practices relating to returns on investment, profits and risk exist within the traditional form of banking, they take on a different form and aim when quilted under the empty signifier of sustainability. Sustainability in this instance informs notions such as transparency and also informs Anuvelar's customers which when linked with the practice of transparency further establishes sustainability as an aim, a focus and as a powerful concept involved with the practice of sustainable finance. The process that is taking place for Anuvelar is a politically positive approach to change enabled by drawing on



the discourse of sustainability. They have to use the same tools, language and some of the metrics as the other financial institutions they set themselves against and are attempting to change. However, such a move was understood by many members of the organisation as changing finance from “the belly of the beast”.

In terms of a political approach to change, this approach is mirrored in discourse theory. Doing and understanding politics through an understanding of discourse as differential, negative and infused with power will lead to an understanding of dominant concepts and logics that articulate particular systems of meaning and action together. As I have established, these dominant concepts are termed empty signifiers and, as they rely to a certain degree on extant powerful concepts, instead of a utopian perfect world around the corner, they are far more likely to be deliberative in character, seeking engagement rather than seeking conflict and complete change. In other words, discourse theory encourages the awareness of powerful concepts that structure certain differential relations. Subsequently, this entire form of explanation and politics privileges an understanding that the world is politically constructed and that due to the nature of language, dominant discourses are never essentially dominant (Laclau, 1990:60).

Nonetheless, this version of sustainability is still an act of articulation, it positions some concepts and tools in a particular relationship with one and other in relation to ultimate aim. Subsequently, other meaning potentials are excluded. In much the same ways as the dominant discourse of shareholder value or profit excludes the pertinence and meaning of sustainability, this understanding of sustainability sets boundaries as to what counts as sustainability and thus excludes and manipulates certain meanings of profit and returns. This action is not premised upon the sheer power of the term sustainability, rather, the emptiness of sustainability, born within an antagonism between pro-environmental/social and pro-financial logics, maintains its catachretic ability to stand as a fluid and yet prominent

signifier that attempts to unify two positions that are incommensurable. With this understanding comes a risk regarding sustainability's malleability and thus mis-use but also an awareness that any articulation can in principle be different. This is where my observations and understandings from this particular case provide a contribution to the broader conceptual discussion of sustainability.

### Discussion: The Risks of Being Empty

The previous two vignettes provide a contextual understanding of sustainability in one particular organisation. The first shows the setting of boundaries around what sustainability stands through the breaching of a shared value through the inclusion of an object and symbol of an "other" that does not belong in an understanding of the "us" at Anuvelar. This boundary setting introduced an antagonism at the centre of the discourse of sustainability within which power and hegemony plays a role in the suturing and articulation of particular concepts. This antagonism was further explored by examining the practice of a credit meeting where decisions were made regarding financial investment in organisations by Anuvelar. In this instance it was possible to see how concepts that related to pro-financial elements such as profit, risk and security were re-articulated and modified by the empty signifier of sustainability. The term empty signifier is used, firstly, as it is a privileged and open signifier which aligns various different positions and ideas within a singular concept. In other words, it represents the "us" of Anuvelar allowing a multitude of meanings to coalesce. Secondly, sustainability is termed an empty signifier as it modifies and occasion might reject alternative positions on for example, the imperative of profit. This dual action of both modifying and aligning points to a certain malleability and fluidity which is often understood as ambiguity in the sustainability literature. In this section I will re-engage with

the extant literature and link what has been discussed in this paper with the broader literature.

### Triple Bottom Line Sustainability

Scholars like Elkington (1997) and Bolch (2008) are part of a cluster of researchers and practitioners who see doing good for the environment and society as also doing good for the financial performance of an organisation. Discussed at the beginning of the paper, they see challenges in any utilisation of sustainability, not contradictions. The argument developed in this paper points to the nature of sustainability as being born within a contradiction. In many respects, the contradiction between pro-financial values and pro-social/environmental values is how sustainability functions, with the various contested elements such as profits and growth on one side and environmental degradation and benefits to society on the other. What matters is how these elements are articulated in contrast to each other. This works both in terms of their meaning, as meaning can only ever be understood in referent to other meanings. Yet also, in terms of political struggle, the antagonism at the centre of sustainability is in many respects up for grabs to be articulated within particular hegemonic articulations in particular spaces and contexts. This understanding is in contrast to the work of Sabadoz (2011) on the related discourse of CSR as it considers the role of power and hegemony in the production of meaning and practices. Sabadoz makes the valid point that a singular definition of CSR is impossible due to the fluid nature of language. Moreover, he makes a similar inference with regard to the tensions within CSR, and by extension sustainability, being productive due to its understanding and meaning. The argument in this paper builds upon this position and adds a deeper consideration to the role of power and the political construction of discourse. Instead of viewing sustainability as inherently open, as Sabadoz does with CSR, we need to consider how particular meanings are drawn together and unified within a particular articulation. In the particular case of Anuvelar investment we

can see how sustainability stands as unifier and modifying concept which quilts and changes the meaning of certain elements of the financial industry. In other instances it is quite possible to see sustainability articulated in a particular way by a unifying concept which privileges profit and shareholder value. Considering these two articulations, of which there are many other potentialities, to leave sustainability or the similar discourse of CSR as having to remain open sidesteps any consideration of power and therefore the progressive engagement within such struggles. It is within the slippery and malleable area of the antagonism of sustainability that politics happens, in the myriad of possible constellations and articulations.

This consideration of power brings us nicely onto the more critical scholars who view the fluidity of sustainability as tantamount to it being a concept that merely reproduces the status quo and offers nothing to try and change organisational practices towards a more pro-social/environmental stance.

### Sustainability as Dangerous

Critical scholars such as Levy (1997) and Banerjee (2003) see sustainability as being nothing more than a concept that reinforces the status quo. In part their position is informed from the evident fluidity and ambiguity apparent within the term. In this paper I have argued that this fluidity is an ever present aspect of any language and social reality. Subsequently, we cannot critique a term due to its ambiguity. However, it is possible to note the propensity for a term, like sustainability, that is so fluid and malleable to be potentially co-opted and articulated into a pro-financial discourse. This is something that is in many respects unavoidable, however, in order to engage with the politics of sustainability a better position is to be aware of its politically constructed nature. Opposed to a view that sustainability is always already co-opted (Doyle, 1991; Stauber and Rampton, 1995) I have shown in this

paper that sustainability can still perform a function in drawing meanings, understandings and practices together towards a common goal that may not necessarily be a sell-out to the capitalist system. Subsequently, we must be aware of particular articulations of sustainability and the ways in which the antagonism within which sustainability is articulated in particular ways by particular forces in an endless struggle to define the world and to (partially) fix meanings.

The articulation of sustainability within Anuvelar points to the possibilities sustainability has as a discourse that struggles against the typical financial imperatives of mainstream business. Although there are problems associated with a concept being 'empty' there are also many rewards. In this particular case sustainability stood as an important and powerful modifier of practice and aligned the various meanings and practices of sustainability in a positive and productive way that looked beyond purely profits. Moreover, taking a wider perspective, having an 'empty' concept like sustainability within the public domain and prevalent throughout countless corporate reports, websites and glossy magazines can be seen as a blessing and not a curse. It allows an entry point and an accepted platform for discussion/action and as (or if) more organisations find success in a sustainable manner the power of the discourse and what is accepted as "counting" as sustainability will become more and more refined and less easier to explain away.

## Concluding Remarks and Future Research

This paper has explored the way in which sustainability is articulated within an organisation through the application of discourse theory and the subsequent understanding of power, discourse and hegemonic struggle. I have developed the understanding of sustainability as being an empty signifier that is dependent upon and shaped by articulations and the role of

powerful discourses within a particular setting. Further research is required into the more subjective aspects of this operation in addition to the role of discourse. For instance, what role does subjectivity play in the relative fixity of sustainability as a discourse within an organisation? Moreover, if an individual aligns themselves or identifies with sustainability and all its inherent contradictions and antagonistic nature what maintains such an identification?

This paper has argued for an understanding of all discourse and meaning as being contingent and fluid, albeit temporarily held in place through power and hegemony. An exploration of the more subjective elements of discourse theory, running alongside the points established in this paper, will shed more light on the nature of sustainability in contemporary organisations.

## Paper 2: Identifying with Sustainability: Fantasies of Sustainable Finance

*“That’s the thing, we have people who have in all sorts of agendas and passions, I am interested in conservation, we have people who are strongly committed to organic food, vegetarianism and Fairtrade. There are people who like what we are doing in the spiritual arena and others that only really care about the benefits of renewable energy. It is kind of like a unity within diversity but I guess it all fits under sustainability. Which, although is a risky term considering how it is used more broadly, it is one of our core values and is certainly a selling point to come and work with us.” (HR Co-Worker at Anuvelar Investments)*

*“..Absolutely I was attracted to Anuvelar because of what it did.. the feel I got from speaking to people who worked here.. the feel I got from looking at the website.. all of that... then.....there was then, the me bit of it... I was struggling to find somewhere where I can work that has similar values to mine and actually this does seem to fit” (Personal Banking Manager)*

Anuvelar Investments is a relatively small sustainable financial services organisation (90 staff) based in the UK. Anuvelar invest in sustainable ventures throughout the UK. Operating in the middle of city centre their investment model is very simple; receive savings from customers and then invest this money into sustainable projects transparently to gain interest for savers. Their investments team is structured around three different groups; organic farming and trade, renewable energy and arts and culture. As stated all investments made are completely transparent, so customers may check on investments in their local area and can also be reassured that no cluster bombs or hydrocarbons will be funded by their money. Anuvelar do not just facilitate investments, they have experts within each market to help businesses with useful contacts and establish networks for small organisations. Anuvelar’s position as a sustainable financial services organisation led to

many individuals concerned about the environment seeking employment at the organisation. This choice was based on a form of identification with what Anuvelar were seeking to achieve. What surfaced from my ethnographic work were the particular ways in which this identification can be understood.

This paper addresses the nature of sustainability as a discourse that promises the unification of various counter-capitalistic or, at least, fairer versions of capitalist discourses, quilted under the signifier sustainability. Drawing on data from a 6 month ethnographic study and interviews conducted at the start of my observation I draw upon discourse theory (Laclau, 1996; Glynos and Howarth, 2007) to explore the affective (Laclau, 2005) character of sustainability as a discourse that is attractive to individuals seeking to make a difference or change to a shared “other” of mainstream finance. What became apparent in my research, however, was that despite the hope sustainability offers for opposing the “other”, the “other” manifested itself in various ways within the organisation causing feelings of anxiety, worry and disappointment. This paper contributes to contemporary understandings of sustainability in organisations by focussing on personal feelings and dilemmas involved when working within sustainability. I ask the question:

*What is the role of affect when examining the discourse of sustainability in a contemporary organisation?*

This is an area in the literature that is significantly overlooked:

“In the sustainability context, there is very little if any analytical work directly focusing on passion for sustainability. Even though environmentalists, popular media and management consultants often talk about the importance of passion, there is no theoretical conception or pedagogic framework for examining this idea” (Shrivastava, 2010:444)



In addition to the role of passion and emotion in the environmental movement it is widely acknowledged that work within organisations has a significant emotional content (Fineman, 2000) and that this emotional content can have a sustaining motivational effect on people (Mintzberg, 1973; Albion, 2000).

Subsequently, issues pertaining to enjoyment and passions play a particular role within sustainability at work and is something that needs to be addressed. In the following analysis this need is addressed through an understanding of affect and its role in structuring individual's behaviours and feelings. Indeed, this is especially the case considering the contingent and fluid nature of sustainability (Parker, 2014). As will be shown, passion for sustainability and particular identifications by individuals in an organisation gives meaning and therefore action to sustainability as well as providing a source of disappointment. Affect in this sense relates not only to an identification with a discourse but also, linking to the literature on emotion, the perceived and felt enjoyment of such an identification. This affective investment relates to a *"force of a desire that is of, and for, 'this' rather than 'that'"* (Contu, 2014: 294). A crucial part of this desire relates to the concept of fantasy (Glynos et al, 2012; Stavrakakis, 1999; Žižek, 1998). Fantasy is the way in which an individual relates to this enjoyment and enables a meaningful commitment for a subjects as a *"scenario that furnishes solidity and homogeneity to the diverse and often contradictory identifications qualifying the meaningful construction of what is at stake"* (Contu, 2014: 294). In this paper, an understanding of identification, therefore, is understood to be mobilised by affect and the concomitant notions of enjoyment and fantasy.

In the following, I first outline the particular character of sustainability as a discourse articulated within contemporary organisations. In particular, I focus upon the contested nature of sustainability more broadly and then link in to the strategic and human resource literature that express or even demand personal engagement from employees. Having done

this, I then provide and explain the conceptual framework and methodology which details my use of theory and the treatment of the ethnographic data collected. Finally, I draw upon empirical vignettes and interview data to explore instances of affect before returning to the key contributions made in this paper

## What is Sustainability?

Sustainability was initially a concept developed by the UN's Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) which sought to address the issues and limits of growth. Since then sustainability has received increasing attention in the organisational theory and management literature (Bansal, 2002; Bansal and Gao, 2006; Banerjee, 2003; Gladwin et al, 1995; Jennings and Zandbergen, 1995). This switch to the 'business' end of society is related to its nature as mediating concept *"that seeks to reconcile the goals of economic development and ecological well-being"* (Livesey, 2002: 315). The broad language used by the Brundtland Report to describe sustainable development as *"the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"* (1987: 15) has allowed a multitude of different interpretations of what sustainability can be. Subsequently, there are thousands of different definitions for what sustainability means. Despite the definitional wrangling and semantic noise, there does appear to be a slight consensus as the most regularly used words in each of these definitions are *management, environment, development, systems* with *economic* and *social* not far behind (Bettencourt and Kaur, 2011; see White, 2013). This is where the problems often begin for sustainability as each of these words can be placed within different settings and different perspectives can be gleaned from each. What this provides is a fertile ground for various understandings of what sustainability can therefore serve.

Sustainability can be understood as a profitable and environmentally friendly initiative which often relates to the 'business case' for sustainability and the triple bottom line of Economic, Social and Environment (e.g. Elkington, 1997; Bolch, 2008). This triple bottom line approach seeks to find a balance between economic, social and environmental pressures and responsibilities, albeit a balance that does not decrease profits too harshly. Mainstream organisational research into sustainability, of which the triple bottom line approach is prominent, often takes this potential profitability as a way of arguing for sustainable practices. In the middle ground, some scholars accept the possibilities of win-win-win sustainability and see *any* consideration of sustainability as preferable to none at all (Livesey and Graham, 2007). Whereas others are more radical and anti-capitalist in their intent for change and see the capitalist organisation as one part of a wider problem in society that means "true" sustainability, and subsequently any attempts to resolve any environmental crises, is impossible (Saurin, 1996).

These radical critiques are often augmented by emotive examples of how not changing organisational practices and ultimately the economic system to become more sustainable risks the lives of individuals in the short term (see Banerjee, 2003) and the long term (Naess, 1989; Brown, 2000; Hawken, 1993). These scholars highlight the antagonistic or even oxymoronic qualities of sustainability within the current economic system. Augmenting this critique of capitalism, critical scholars like Levy (1997), Redclift (1987) and Springett (2003) perceive sustainability as enabling this system to continue as a way of placating customers, suppliers, regulators (Newton and Harte, 1997) and even their own employees (Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Jones, 2012; Costas and Kärreman, 2013). These critical scholars view sustainability as a form of deception, often termed green-washing that enables capitalism and capitalist organisations to appear friendlier and more appealing.

In summary, sustainability is by no means a simple and singular concept. Depending on the context it is applied sustainability (Parker, 2014; Tregidga et al, 2013) can range from a harmonious notion where everybody wins to an insidious parasite that appears beautiful and appealing but is in fact working in partnership with corporations that perhaps do not have the best interests of the environment at heart. Considering its polysemic nature, sustainability when embedded, implemented or encouraged in an organisation has to be approached with caution. Firstly, sustainability is not a simple or monolithic notion that comes with a ready-made definition. Secondly, the notion or discourse of sustainability is not simply a new business practice or part of a latest management fashion, it has implications and therefore affinities for employees that stretch beyond the organisation. Finally, it is a term that can be seen, at its core, to be oxymoronic or at least largely contested. Even though many have attempted to contain sustainability within a model that stresses its mutually beneficial nature it still represents a fundamental challenge to the status quo. After all, if sustainability was to truly create balance between the economy, society and the environment the nature of business, corporations and the stock market would dramatically change.

Despite the contested and political nature of sustainability strategic and human resource texts, which seek to develop methods for implementing sustainability in organisations, often call for the need to engage and encourage the “human factors” of sustainability (Bansal, 2003; Epstein and Buhovac, 2010; Haugh and Talwar, 2010). Such an engagement calls for the values of sustainability, as experienced by employees in an organisation, to be embraced and understood as a crucial component to establishing and embedding sustainability within an organisation. For example, Dunphy et al (2003), in a text that aims to promote pathways to sustainability through organisational change stress the need for leaders and change agents within an organisation. These internal change agents span from CEOs and senior management to supervisors and general employees with the aim of engaging with the

strategy of sustainability and to understand and emotionally identify with the cause (Ibid: 277). Similarly, Marc Epstein is a sustainability scholar whose research and later work with Adriana Buhovac sets out a strategic model and implementation strategy for 'making sustainability work' (Epstein, 2008; Epstein and Buhovac, 2010). Within the model presented (Epstein, 2008) we see the need to consider human resources as an important factor of sustainability implementation. Similarly, Haugh and Talwar (2010) present a strategy to embed sustainability that focuses on every employee within an organisation (p 384) and devote four sub-headings related to engaging people with sustainability within an organisation: *Communications and Dialogue*, *Employee Training and Workshops*, *Company Visits* and *Employee Training and Workshops*. Interestingly, Haugh and Talwar discuss an issue that deserves more attention and relates to my research question:

"...raising employee awareness about sustainability issues may simultaneously increase expectations about the extent of the contribution that the MNC (Multi National Corporation) can make to their resolution. The expectation-performance gap will need to be acknowledged and addressed in corporate communications." (p393)

This consideration acknowledges the radical potential of sustainability and stipulates that there are potential affective and political commitments from employees. However, they note that this issue will need to be curtailed. Here, sustainability is being set limits as to what it should achieve within an organisation. Moreover, there is an awareness that expectations have to be managed, otherwise employees, with their newly found embedded sustainability practices and knowledge might have the chance to become more radical or, at least, disheartened by the limits of sustainable change.

Similarly, the human resource literature have responded to sustainability by calling for members of the human resource department of organisations to become leaders of sustainability (Sroufe et al, 2010) and the significant role that employees in organisations

represent in fostering sustainability (Harmon et al, 2010; Wirtenberg, 2014; Wirtenberg et al, 2007). Of particular note is Liebowitz's (2010) polemic on what appears to be a perfect sustainable organisation full of innovation, collaboration, trust, mentoring and job security. All of which stress the role of people within sustainability but offer no insight into the current nature of working with sustainability.

Although the various trade-offs and dilemmas facing managers and employees are discussed in both the human resource and strategic literature there is not nearly enough attention paid to the various subjective factors associated when working with sustainability. Scholars are correct to include the need for employees to engage with sustainability, however, it is important to look in more detail at how an individual negotiates and feels the various dilemmas and contradictions that individuals face when working within sustainability. After all, sustainability can be understood as a discourse that sits within an antagonism between pro-social/environmental and pro-financial logics. In this sense it is constructed through and within a contradiction that will manifest in tensions regarding their work practices and the decisions organisational members have to make regarding, for example, profits, timescales and suppliers. Instead of boxes within models or sub-headings entitled "human resources" (Dunphy et al, 2003; Epstein and Buhravac, 2010) this paper intends to open these boxes and examine and understand what working within sustainability really entails. In order to do so, I must first establish my conceptual framework and research methodology in order to frame an understanding of subjectivity and, in particular, an understanding of the way a subject might feel or become involved and invested with sustainability on a personal level.

## Conceptual Framework and Methodology

In this section I establish the many strengths of discourse theory in being able to address my research question, contribution to the sustainability literature and to enable an understanding of sustainability as an ambiguous, contested and crucially an affective concept.

In a previous paper, I have discussed the nature of sustainability as being an empty signifier (Parker, 2014) in the sense that sustainability is a fluid and malleable discourse that allows a multitude of meanings to coalesce around a signifier. This fluidity provides a certain power to modify and align meanings of particular endeavours against a perceived “other” or “them”. This theoretical framework goes beyond signification and conceptual understandings and specifies the role of the individual subject and the related practices of identification and investment with discourse. Importantly, concerning identification there is an understanding of the productive notion of affect as playing an important role within discourse and language. As Laclau notes:

“There is no possibility of a language in which the value relations would be established only between formally specifiable units. So affect is required if signification is going to be possible” (Laclau, 2005: 111)

Subsequently, the role of affect which links to the nature of subjectivity and identification, must be explored alongside an understanding of meaning. Sustainability as an empty signifier does not only possess a certain power to bend and challenge meanings, it operates a similar power over individual subjectivity, of which affect is a crucial component in making certain discourses “stick” to subjects. In the following I flesh out the theoretical perspective of discourse theory and the role of affect within this perspective. Having done so, I then establish my proposed research method before moving on to discuss my empirical data.

## Discourse Theory

Discourse theory is a collection of loosely held ideas relating to an understanding of discourse premised on negativity and signification in social analysis. Importantly, the link between discourse and subjectivity, termed an identification, is mediated by the role of affect. Affect in this instance relates to the force behind certain identifications for individuals and is synonymous with the role language in social reality:

“Affect is not something which exists on its own, independently of language: it constitutes itself only through the differential cathexes of a signifying chain... (T)he complexes which we call ‘discursive or hegemonic formations’... would be intelligible without the affective component” (Laclau, 2005: 111)

To unpack these ideas it is important to first establish the role of discourse as a signifying practice and its role in the constitution of the social and thus subjectivity and identification. Having done this, I return to the role of affect in discourse theory.

Discourse is defined as:

“Any complex of elements in which *relations* play the constitutive role. This means that elements do not pre-exist the relational complex but are constituted through it” (Laclau, 2005: 68)

This understanding of discourse stresses the role of language as being fluid and contingent as it is constituted in relation to other meanings and signifiers and that these relations are arbitrary. In other words, within language and any utterance there is always space for the slippage of meaning and the potential for an utterance to be different. It is the slippage of language, in not being able to ever be fully essential or complete, that points to a certain negativity within language that can never be conveyed. This negativity reinforces the



contingency in discourse but also allows an understanding of how each discourse attempts to suture or incorporate this negativity or lack:

“The “constitutive outside” blocks the identity of the inside but yet is a prerequisite for the construction of the inside.” (Bridgman and Willmott, 2006: 6)

It is because of this “constitutive outside” or negativity that objects (for example groups, organisations or concepts) could be constructed differently within discourse and also why these objects are never fixed and stable. Taking this negativity and fluidity into consideration, discourse theory is a form of analysis that considers negativity as “*constitutive of the social*” and therefore “*places politics at the centre of its ontology*” (Contu and Willmott, 2006: 1772). Discourse theory places politics at the centre of its ontology as it is understood that the articulation of particular discourses and signifiers affect the ways in which social reality is understood and acted within. As we do not live in a psychotic universe (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; 112) where there is no order of meaning and everything exists as potentially everything else, the politics at the centre of discourse theory relate to the power of hegemony and hegemonic articulations to forcibly create perceived orders of meaning. The process of hegemony creates orders of meaning that (attempt to) convey a certain message by attempting to exclude elements and concepts that might contradict the hegemonic discourse or, attempting to quilt or suture over antagonisms between competing discourses. Hegemony and hegemonic articulations are instances where, over time, identities, objects and discourses achieve an “objective presence” (Laclau, 1990: 34). In other words, they appear *as if* they are objective and stable as part of the status quo despite being premised within and upon contingency and fluidity. Subsequently, this suturing of the negativity within discourse is fundamental to our understanding of reality (Contu and Willmott, 2005).

If we are then to see social reality as being discursively constituted in language and through power, it is important to then explore the subjects that act, speak and feel within this

power-loaded terrain. Such a consideration is at the cornerstone of my approach to sustainability in this paper. When considering the role of the subject within this discursive arena the role of affect and enjoyment becomes a crucial factor:

“There is no possibility of a language in which the value relations would be established only between formally specifiable units. So affect is required if signification is going to be possible” (Laclau, 2005: 111)

It is within language that subjects acquire a sense of identity. However, within language and discourse we are not only speaking subjects but also *“desiring subjects caught in the metonymical sliding of the signifier”* (Contu and Willmott, 2006: 1772). What this means is that the subject is considered, first and foremost, a subject that is confronted with the undecidability and fluidity of discourse. The only way to attempt to reconcile this negativity within discourse is to identify with an object or discourse. However, having once identified the subject must then confront the inherent antagonisms caused by the undecidability within discourse. This operation thus guarantees that the subject can never fully achieve identity with itself as antagonism constitutively separates it from objectivity or stability, which subsequently stimulates more desire to identify with something or someone and thus sustaining it as a subject (Laclau, 1990: 41).

Crucially, it is not just due to some form of linguistic necessity that particular identifications are made. As Contu (2014: 294) notes:

“There is not only a form of investment in an identification with a discourse but also a force, a quality, to the investment”

This ‘quality’ or ‘force’ provokes a necessity to identify with various discourses, however, the role of ‘force’ relates to an affective pull for individual subjects as they attempt to find some form of stable meaning for a sense of self and that sets boundaries for being ‘for this’ and not ‘for that’. This stability can be linked to hegemony and power and thus explain the

potential for certain discourses to “stick” to individuals as they “*deny or obfuscate contingency*” (Glynos et al, 2012). Discourses that produce this investment and identification are referred to in discourse theory as “empty signifiers” (Laclau, 1996: 36) as they stand as a prominent signifier that articulate a series of demands into a larger movement. The empty signifier does so through being able to unite individual’s disparate struggles and demands within a discourse that struggles against the same ‘thing’ or ‘other’. This perceived unification relates to the notion of affect and subsequent role of fantasy, as an object or idea that structures and organises desire. On one level identification becomes important in an unstable social milieu as a promise of stability. On another there is a prominent role for the ‘force’ of affect in aligning individuals for or against particular activities, people or regimes through shared or individually held fantasies. Fantasies in this sense are not abstract day-dreams, rather it is important to see the role of fantasy as political (Stavrakakis, 1999: 52) and also pertaining directly to practice (Cederström and Spicer, 2013). Fantasies can be beatific in character and have a mesmerizing faculty that relates to a perfect world around the corner and thus stabilize and unify groups and individuals with the promise of a fullness to come (Glynos et al, 2012; Glynos and Howarth, 2007). Fantasies can also have destabilizing effects that demonise what is diametrically opposed to the beatific (Žižek, 1998). Destabilizing fantasies, often termed ‘horrific fantasies’, concentrate on bringing forward particular groups or regimes that are deemed responsible for preventing the beatific fantasy. Often elements of both beatific and horrific fantasies are at play when it comes to a joint political project or a shared ideal within an organisation. Both versions of fantasy are prominent in my analysis of sustainability. On the one hand there are the beatific versions of sustainability as force for good and something that individuals are actively enthused to pursue. On the other hand, horrific fantasies appear in two ways. Firstly, they underpin the beatific version of sustainability. After all in order for people to perceive that the beatific version of sustainability is ‘making a difference’ there has to be an adversary or

enemy to which they are attempting to change. Another way in which the horrific fantasy appears in my analysis is the fear that this particular organisation may be 'selling out' and turning into what individuals believe they are opposing. Discourse theory provides the analytical and theoretical tools to engage with such complexity. This can be seen in the ways in which it sets up an understanding of discourse as being incomplete and lacking, therefore requiring acts of identification. Furthermore, that these acts of identification are structured through and around particular fantasmatic objects and discourses via affect. The lack or undecidability of discourse means that subjects are thrown into an unstable world and the only way to rectify this instability is to identify with particular discourses in particular ways. As desiring subjects, individuals seek refuge within identifications and this action is lubricated by shared fantasies relating to concrete phenomena that can either be beatific or horrific in character.

## Methodology and Data Set

To explore the role of affect, enjoyment and fantasies within the discourse of sustainability, I collected data through a 6 month ethnography and open-ended interviews. In this section I introduce the setting, explain my data collection methods and analytical process before describing the empirical material utilised in this article.

Data collection was conducted in the summer of 2013 at Anuvelar Investments<sup>10</sup>, a relatively small organisation (90 employees) that invested in sustainable ventures. Access was requested by email to the managing director (MD) followed by continued liaison with the MD and his team regarding my presence and the type of access needed. A report and my

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<sup>10</sup> A pseudonym.

contribution to various projects were provided in return for access to the site. Data collection consisted of observation (799 hours in total) which were recorded by the writing of field notes that included memos that I would later develop upon outside of the study setting. Artefacts such as reports, secondary information about the organisation and minutes from meetings and 39 semi-structured interviews were also collected and included in the corpus of data.

Although there are no prescriptions for methods from a discourse theory perspective, an approach that accesses the discursive context of particular articulations is beneficial for a relational understanding of, in this case, sustainability (Glynos and Howarth, 2007). The choice of ethnographic research was due to this need to get close to the action. Being (and preferably working) in an organisation, opposed to questionnaires or discourse analysis of official documents, encourages participants to provide and drive meanings (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). The role for the researcher is then to understand and plot these participant-lead understandings and meanings with reference to theory.

Ethnography involves working closely with an organisation, observing naturally occurring events (Silverman, 1985) and making the familiar strange (Silverman, 2007) or exotic (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000). The focus at the start of my fieldwork was to understand the practices and meanings of sustainability. What struck me during my time at Anuvelar, however, was the evocative language and general enthusiasm for sustainability from members of the organisation. I subsequently embraced this emergent theme in my field work and latterly in my analysis. An ethnographic method is very useful for exploring something as personal as affect as it allowed me to develop bonds and relationships with the people in my study. By working alongside and, in some instances, struggling to complete tasks and joking about things around the office allowed real insights into what it can be like to work in sustainable finance. As is understood in ethnographic work, analysis is not a final

stage of the research process. Rather observations, reflections and field-notes are already a form of analysis as part of constant process of reflection (Hammersley and Atkinson, 2010; Rosen, 1991). This on-going analysis, which did continue after my time in the field, was based on an iterative process of reading and scrutinising my field-notes and roughly coding various stories, themes and memos. Throughout this process I reflected upon what emerged in reference to the field and theory. This retroductive process (Glynos and Howarth, 2007) of moving back and forth between theoretically informed 'sensitising' concepts and the field allowed a form of middle-range theorising to manifest<sup>11</sup> within the analysis. To be clear, I was not searching for theory within the field. Rather, the aim of a retroductive method is to use theoretical concepts to better explain and build upon the stories and observations collected during my fieldwork.

## Sustainability as an Empty Signifier: Beautiful Things, the “other” and Making a Difference

This section addresses the way in which sustainability works within and is organised around affect and fantasy in an organisation. Firstly, I explore how sustainability is viewed as a catch-all term that is full of meanings and potential good feelings. However, I also explore how sustainability contains darker and more sinister fantasies pointing towards non-sustainable ventures and potentialities and even guilt relating to the current system and previous employment. In this section I want to discuss this dual operation in referent to

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<sup>11</sup> For a full discussion of retroduction and its uses with discourse theory see Glynos and Howarth (2007, Chapter 1)

sustainability being an empty signifier and the positive and negative fantasies it fosters for individual subjects. I start, however, with my first steps at Anuvelar Investments.

I began my ethnographic work at Anuvelar Investments in April 2012 seeking to explore the practices of sustainability in a contemporary organisation. Before I arrived at the organisation I was aware that sustainability was a core value for the organisation, however, I was unsure as to whether this value was simply written on a website or whether it was a strong value that was understood and shared by employees. On my first day at Anuvelar I was given a tour of the office. We went upstairs to the lunch area which was full of colourful and rustic looking tables and chairs. Such furnishings not only looked amazing but, as I was later shown, had the sustainable credentials to match. For instance, the coffee tables were created from what was once considered rubbish, making use of discarded wood. The 'Indian Poufs' dotted around the lunch area are made from recycled vintage fabric and filled with the fibre extracted from the seed pod of the kapok tree. As I later found out, the furnishings throughout the whole organisational space were consciously sourced from sustainable companies (many of whom were existing customers and clients) who would use recycled materials and green energy to construct quirky, yet aesthetically pleasing products. At the end of my tour I was given a booklet called *'Showcasing our Values'* which included details of where and how each object (from urinals to lighting) was made and further re-instated each product's sustainable credentials as being sourced from recycled wood, manufactured through the use of renewable energy or, for example the waterless urinals, looking to the future by saving 30,000 litres of water a year.

What was noticeable in this initial tour and in the development of this booklet, "Showcasing" the values of Anuvelar to both customers and employees, was the aim to establish sustainability as something that was good and valued. Not only that, but also there was an impetus to show that sustainability could be something aesthetically pleasing and attractive

and not necessarily a compromise. In this sense, it was suggesting that sustainability does not have to be like the recycled paper of old, which resembled a thin mottled sponge and would barely accept ink from a pen. Rather, sustainability, through the objects and furnishings displayed was deliberately shown to be practical, useful and fundamentally fashionable and desirable. The version of sustainability on display, therefore, was one that tries to gets you excited by the ingenuity and innovation of designers and blows you away with colour and beauty. At the same time, you are safe in the knowledge that each object was constructed in the most sustainable way possible and thus guilt free. To then have a booklet transparently baring all to employees at Anuvelar just serves to hammer this home to employees and clients. This initial experience, entering into an attractive and sustainability office space, set the tone for a beatific understanding of sustainability. It was a sustainability that invoked positive feelings and enjoyment.

As an introduction to the themes that develop in my later analysis it is possible to establish that this beatific and desirable display of ‘sustainable objects’ relates to a stabilising or positive fantasy that pulls individuals together towards a shared agenda. What surfaces in this understanding in my later analysis, however, is the largely hidden destabilising prospect of the horrific fantasy. The idea of the horrific fantasy relates to all those “other” organisations out in the world and the market who appear to be set upon destroying the environment, people’s lives and livelihoods through aggressive tactics and a lack of care. This way of thinking gained purchase considering Anuvelar’s presence in the financial services market where instances of poor behaviour were not difficult to find (see *The Economist*, September 7<sup>th</sup> 2013; *The Observer*, 28<sup>th</sup> December, 2008 and Glynos et al, 2012). The destabilising fantasy provoked feelings of fear, anxiety and, as we will go on to see, manifestations of guilt for having once been involved in “other” organisations or, more positively, needing to join an organisation that is trying to change the system. In this instance, both stabilising and destabilising fantasies are held together by the empty signifier



of sustainability. Due to the flexibility and power that the term holds (Parker, 2014) it can stand as something which embodies hope and a particular stance towards the mainstream. Yet, at the same time, its broad understanding allows a variety of positions and other ideas (such as organic, Fairtrade, philanthropy) to coalesce around a prominent and known signifier.

In the following analysis I start to unpack the operation of the empty signifier of sustainability and the role of affect and fantasy through interview data pertaining to individual's reasons for joining Anuvelar. These responses were chosen as they outline directly individual's hopes and motivations for joining an organisation specialising in sustainability. From the interview data themes developed relating to 'matching values', 'guilt' and 'fear'. All of which, I argue, contribute towards an identification with sustainability and the perceived nature of the organisations' activities, promoting sustainable finance. As is shown later, such an identification, in this instance entails the understanding of a shared "us", matching values between a person and a group/entity and a shared "them" or "other" which is mediated and constructed within affect/discourse.

### Matching Values and Making a Difference

A strong desire to work for an organisation that matches an individual's values emerged from the data:

*"it was a pull factor in terms of values... in terms of wanting to be part of something that is more important than ultimately making money for someone who is paid too much" (Co-worker in the PR department)*

*"I feel.. and I have never had this before.. that I feel like there is a purpose in going to work in the morning.. there is a purpose for the job that you do" (Receptionist)*

Despite the various differences including department, age or stage of career there was an evident investment in the work the organisation was doing in relation to sustainability. The discourse of sustainability was established as a concept existing within broader politics and life as well as within a particular organisation. Within my corpus of data associated activities relating to sustainability would include: charity work, buying particular produce – be it organic, fairtrade or recycled – avoiding particular shops and companies. Subsequently, if a person's place of work did not follow suit with these particular lifestyle choices it was felt as an embarrassment or something to feel guilty about.

Such a phenomena is not new to organisational research with the work of Schein pointing to notions of “organisational fit” and “matching values” in 1985. This work has subsequently been built upon throughout the years establishing various understandings (Chatman, 1989; O'Reilly et al, 1991; Goodman and Svyantek, 1999). Research into person-organisation fit establishes how recruits whose values match the values of the organisation adjust to their working environment quicker (Chatman, 1989). Furthermore, those individuals with matching values to that of the organisation, are more satisfied (O'Reilly et al, 1991), perform better (Goodman and Svyantek, 1999) and remain in the organisation longer (Chatman, 1989). Re-interpreting these results through a discourse theory lens, the argument can be made that “matching values” relate to the need for individuals to identify with discourses. As explained earlier, the subject is considered, first and foremost, a subject that is confronted with the undecidability and fluidity of discourse. Subsequently, the only way to attempt to reconcile the undecidable negativity of discourse is to identify with an object or discourse to partially close or suture the undecidability of social reality (Laclau, 1990: 41). This understanding is further augmented by a consideration of affect and an ‘investment’ or force and relates to an affective pull experienced by individuals. An identification thus relates to an affective pull towards a powerful discourse and structures and organises a person's identifications and behaviours. In this instance, the prospect of working for an

organisation that is aligned with the discourse of sustainability appears attractive, it matches an individual's values. Subsequently, a subject identifies with Anuvelar and sustainability as they stand side by side in an equivalential relationship. This equivalential relationship between Anuvelar, sustainability and the individual effectively (and affectively) creates a boundary as being "for the environment", "for society" or "for fairness". This boundary establishes an "us" but also, in doing so, creates an "other". An "other", which in the selected quotes above would be referred to as places where *"people are paid too much"*, a common trait of mainstream finance. "Matching Values" therefore, can be linked to an attempt to engage with and even defeat the "other" that stands against the "us" identified with by Anuvelar employees:

*"I was thinking 'well this is my opportunity to part of this sustainable growth' and do something which I believe will add value and make sense.. I had offers from the financial regulator which would mean I could influence the industry.. but I still wanted to come here" (Compliance Manager)*

*"I had never thought about financial services.. I am not a banker so I don't have any banking qualifications but I do have a quite deep rooted past in thinking how you can use the power of money to influence change and thinking about policy interventions to deliver environmental change" (Investment Director)*

Wanting to *"influence the industry"* or *"influence change"* allows us to see instances where individuals make a positive identification with sustainability as a powerful discourse that promises the possibility to stand within a particular discourse and enable change. More importantly, the meaning of the discourse is established within this boundary setting and the establishment of an "us" and an "other". Although there was an affective pull and attraction to the "feel" and "good goals" of the organisation, there were contrasting feelings of negativity towards previous employers and "other" organisations. In many respects the destabilizing fantasy of the "other" was reinforcing the stabilising fantasy of the "us" that can enable change.

My ethnographic notes were also full of talk of “those banks”, “other places” and “nasty organisations” that pointed to the things or people that will ruin the world through their greed and premeditated dismantling of the environment through unsustainable activities and investments. For instance, every day at Anuvelar an email was sent out by the marketing and PR department who find press coverage of Anuvelar but also of anything interesting that is being covered. These emails contained positive stories about, for example, new wind farms, the Green Party’s political conference and key environmental research. They also contained a great deal of coverage of these “other” financial institutions which often spurred on conversations within the office. My time in the organisation was in the summer of 2012 so the Standard Chartered money laundering scandal got a lot of coverage as did Bob Diamond’s demise at Barclay’s. As language is structured by difference, pointing to what a discourse is not is effectively the only way to establish what a discourse stands to be. This is mirrored within an affective understanding of discourse. By developing scenarios, “others” or even demonising those not within a particular discourse allows a shared purpose to develop. Theoretically, relating to the impossibility of a full identification for the subject, the presence of “others” can be understood as *the reason* for this impossibility. This may not be consciously recognised as the reason behind an individual’s actions, however, it is a useful to explain certain identifications. What sustainability appeared to offer was a potential fullness for individuals that either have become, or always were, unsatisfied with the current system and industry:

*“I was desperate to get a job at Anuvelar. Before whenever anyone asked me about where I worked I would quickly change the subject – now I can’t stop telling people about what I am doing” (Co-worker in Personal Finance)*

*“.. it was about the point which I was knocking around an arms bizarre in Bracknell.. being offered ice cream by bikini clad girls with guns that I realised that maybe once again I had stumbled down the wrong avenue and wasn’t doing good.. I kind of had a revelation in the shadow of a big black*

*helicopter that I was trying to sell. That maybe.. I should use the skills set I have better.. I do exactly what I do there, here. But I do it for a good company with good goals” (Sales Representative)*

Furthermore, the operation of both stabilizing and destabilizing fantasies provoked many to talk about sacrifices when it came to working for Anuvelar:

*“I certainly didn’t join for the money! I wanted something that fitted my values, my actions outside of work. I mean, I am involved in lots of charities outside of work, involved with the church..” (Finance director)*

*“I came here at a much lower level than I wanted.. I am pretty much at the bottom level but I can see enough avenues and things like that.. and I mean the environmental and sustainable aspects of the company and things like that, I value a lot more than a few grand in my pay packet” (Customer Operations Co-worker)*

This, again, pointed to the affective force in operation within sustainability and points to a common understanding of “other” financial institutions as being obsessed with money.

Being paid less, was almost like a badge of honour, grounding that person within a discourse that excludes this traditional logic of high monetary gain through employment. Furthermore, in terms of the discourse of sustainability, one of the key elements of the discourse is that big bonuses and high salaries encourage unsustainable behaviour. If this were to be the case at Anuvelar the shared understanding of sustainability would be threatened by this element from another discourse. Indeed, during my time at the organisation transparency of remuneration was demanded by the employees at Anuvelar and was communicated to the company from customers.

So far I have outlined the ways in which individual’s identification with sustainability is “sustained” by affect. This operation functions in two ways, firstly, there is an initial identification with the discourse of sustainability and Anuvelar, a place that matches the values of individuals. Secondly, the role of sustainability’s stance contra

traditional/mainstream methods is drawn upon to establish the boundaries of what sustainability stands to mean, as an “us”, but also points towards what sustainability is not: the “other”.

Building from this position, working within sustainability sometimes did not fulfil the promise of the beatific fantasy, rewarding as it might have seemed. Utilising an ethnographic method, in addition to interviews, enabled me to go deeper into what working with sustainability actually entailed. Such an exploration gave a different insight into the pain and problems associated with sustainability. In particular, the following section explores: the fear of moving towards or incorporating the “other”, cynicism and issues of monotony and boredom associated with the nature of operating as a financial services organisation. It starts with a story.

### The Fear of Becoming what you Fear the Most: The Role of Affect in Sustainability Tensions

*Phillip works in customer operations at sustainable financial services organisation Anuvelar Investments. He ran into work this morning from a house he shares with two students and after a shower the first thing he does is head up to the top floor to get a triple shot latte from the Fairtrade coffee machine. I see him at the coffee machine and we both head down to the 1<sup>st</sup> floor to a cluster of 8 desks occupied by individuals working on the administrative and bureaucratic tasks needed to keep a modern financial institution running. ID checks for individuals hoping to open an ISA, anti-money laundering checks, increasing overdraft facilities for business clients and processing payments.*

*In an interview conducted when I first arrived at the organisation Phillip described his journey to Anuvelar: “When I left University I had always planned on getting into sustainable or ethical finance. Initially I thought I would get some experience in the bigger financial firms before heading over to do something good with my life.”*

*Settling down to work, Phillip opens up the bespoke software system created for Anuvelar that all decisions, actions and queries are run through. Taking a sip of latte, Phillip opens up his email and checks his twitter account whilst he waits for the programme to fire up. A whiteboard at the corner of the room displays the team’s performance, they are currently running behind and many transactions are taking longer than the 3 days that are promised to clients and customers.*

*“So I worked at a typical finance firm before I came here. It was rough, a lot of it was cold calling and high pressure sales, things like that. So I wasn’t comfortable with most of that and the atmosphere at that place was toxic”*

*A selection of sweets sits on one of the islands of filing cabinets, other members of the team are filtering in as a tea round is being processed and the white board is being changed based on yesterday’s performance, a red pen is being used today, just to reinforce how poorly the team is performing. “That’s motivational isn’t it?” a colleague comments to Phillip with a smile. The team are all young individuals with none above the age of 26 and are supervised by an older and longstanding employee.*

*“Having been at the old place for long enough, I decided to look around for opportunities at places that fitted my outlook on the world. This wasn’t the plan, of course, but I thought about the whole ‘being at the bottom of a ladder you want to climb’ analogy. So I went “good” earlier than I had planned but I am now in a much nicer working environment and I know that my actions are improving the world.”*

*It's been just over 2 months since I conducted this interview with Phillip and now I am based in customer operations and able to observe and listen in on the inner workings of sustainable finance. The red pen has finally completed its work on the whiteboard and is put away by the customer operations supervisor. Phillip then walks over to a filing cabinet pulls out work that is on-going with the team and they all gather round to finish off things they were working on last night or to start a new task. This gathering around a trough of work is accompanied with sighs, additional information and updates from the team supervisor and knowing nods and smiles when familiar clients and tasks are revealed. Everyone returns to their desks opens up the relevant area of the system and starts work. Their actions are all logged on the system and currently many members of the team get their work checked each day by colleagues to ensure that fewer mistakes are made. Focus is on due process, making their work "right first time" and following the set frameworks and pathways put in place.*

*Speaking in a later interview Phillip comments: "It's boring, you can tell. Occasionally we get something exciting or different that goes against what we normally have to do due to a request from the investment team. That is when it can get interesting and you can be a bit more creative. When it comes to the sustainability stuff, my work is so far removed from that. We get reminded of it now and again, I mean, we get to put through the paperwork on a loan for a business called 'Mindy's Organic Tea Rooms' or some of the bigger renewables firms. But apart from names like that, this is bog-standard banking, paperwork and process, that's all. Plus we get these targets we can't meet, we get micro-managed and have very little freedom. We are just parts of the machine. I have to go around to the investment team now and again to file bits and bobs and I love it. Just listening to the conversations happening over there and the deals being made and the things being discussed. That's sustainable finance, this is just, work."*



Phillip is a person who is passionate about sustainability, he hopes to change the way in which finance and, more broadly, businesses operate with regard to the environment and society. Sustainability motivated him to join Anuvelar and it keeps him going through some pretty mundane tasks. Despite a commitment to sustainability and the challenge to the mainstream it proposes Phillip is faced with the reality that Anuvelar must still operate within an industry that is premised upon numbers, process and crucially is regulated by the financial services authority. In much the same way, sustainability as a discourse is mediated by this relationship, as it sits within an antagonism between pro-financial and pro-social/environmental logics and aims. Subsequently, for Phillip the role of affect in suturing this antagonism takes an interesting turn.

What was interesting to see was the difference between the proposed identification with sustainability, outlined during my interview with Phillip and his actual work practices. During the initial interviews Phillip displays his passions and motivations for joining a sustainable organisation: *“Going good”* earlier than he had planned after a pretty poor experience at another firm so that he could *“make a difference”*. What he is confronted with in his day to day practices, however, is the front line of financial bureaucracy; checking identities, being aware of money laundering, focussing on due process, targets and being right first time. There are instances where he is reminded of the *“good”* that is being done but to him, it is just work. The material practices of working within a financial institution can be seen as symbolically representing the *“other”*, as a form of feeding the financial machine. Phillip identifies with the fantasy inherent in the discourse of sustainability but its nature, as a discourse reliant on a system that it seeks to change, leads him to a conflict between the perceived affect and the actual practices.

The appearance of the *“other”* within the Anuvelar is a theme that appeared when discussing the role of profit and the changes apparent in the organisation as it grew:

*"If you look back to where the world of finances came from, it came from a fairly pure base. If you look at Barclay's and Lloyds, they were Quaker banks and purely on the basis of people's religious conviction and the they have long since lost those Quaker roots and morals. Now, is Anuvelar heading in that direction? Because we have already lost a number of things that we used to do. Things that no other financial services organisations were doing and they are truly enabling and we no longer do them, administratively, they have become too difficult. You can't make money out of them, and that's it, you can't make money out of them, so we are now measuring things in making money. Will we end up, 100 years from now, just another financial institution? Doing what all the other banks do: trading derivatives that sort of thing, because we've got shareholders that we have to keep happy? Or will we be a much smaller organisation focussed entirely on doing good? And I don't know.. at the moment it looks like we heading towards a slow trip towards.... the more diluted... but larger organisation"*

*(Relationship Manager – Investments Team)*

Fear of the "other" manifested in the previous section as outside discourses that could be defeated or engaged with from a position and identification within the discourse of sustainability. The quote above establishes a greater fear: what if Anuvelar becomes an "other". Within this quote, a fear is established and also an allegory is developed that shows that even the big banks of UK finance had religious and moral roots that, it is argued, have subsequently been lost. Dismissing useful projects because *"You can't make money out of them"* develops a fear for this participant of the co-optation of what makes Anuvelar different to other organisations, signified by a shift to monetising projects instead of seeking to do *"good"*. As Barclay's and Lloyd's lost their moral and religious roots, so might Anuvelar lose their "sustainable" roots. These sort of tensions, again, relate to the antagonistic nature of sustainability as a concept that sits between pro-social/environmental and pro-financial logics. Any organisation has to weave a particular path through this terrain, however, such an activity can lead to tensions, problems and fears for individuals who identify with sustainability. A consequence of these actions led to degrees of cynicism being displayed within the organisation:

*“The single biggest thing that I’m afraid of, internally, is cynicism... the one thing that will kill Anuvelar quicker than anything else is forgetting what we do.. or getting cynical about it... you get it sometimes from new guys and you get it from old guys who’ve been with the company for a while. But ultimately when you kind of lose sight of what we do because of a routine, you can lose touch with why you come to work.” (Manager, Personal Investments)*

This quote mirrors the struggles of Phillip, in addition to the pro-financial pursuit of profit, the fundamentals of being a financial organisation, regulated by the Financial Services Association, make it so that issues of compliance, bureaucracy and process become a part of working within sustainability. The projected feelings of “matching values” with Anuvelar and their sustainable approach can be seen as gradually ebbing away for some as cynicism crept in. The cause of this dissatisfaction is the symbolic presence of a burgeoning “other” inside the organisation. Not, that Barclay’s were buying or setting up shop in their building, but that the symbols, goals and practices of mainstream finance were having an adverse effect on individual identifications with sustainability. Speaking in terms of affect and the notion of fantasy the presence of this “other” can be recognised as the obstacle between the subject and the beatific fantasy presented by sustainability. The theme of a ‘fear of becoming what you most fear’ in that respect proliferates cynicism and worry in the organisation but also, in a way, strengthens and reinforces the identification with sustainability. It does so through instilling a reminder of what sustainability stands against, but also maintains the project of sustainability as subjects are continually disappointed that the fantasy that provoked their identification never becomes a reality. In this sense it is perennially blocked by the “other” apparent within the discourse of sustainability and this maintains and cultivates further identification within the discourse.

On the other hand, there will be limits as to what a subject can take. In this particular case, the beatific fantasy is predicated on the fear of, but also attempts to change, the horrific fantasy of mainstream finance. Subsequently, if Anuvelar does in fact change to a larger and

diluted version of itself the beatific fantasy will no longer have hold and individuals will be compelled to leave the organisation or resist the changes as best they can.

## Discussion

This paper explores issues of identification, affect and fantasy in regard to the discourse of sustainability at a sustainable financial services organisation. Noting a need to explore the “human factors” or subjective issues outlined in the strategic and human resources literature this paper contributes to an understanding of the role of affect when working within sustainability. Working from the evident antagonism within sustainability, as a contested and contingent discourse, I show that in the process of a subject identifying with sustainability there are two forms of fantasy at play in this engagement, both of which are premised on an “other” that is a necessary aspect of sustainability more broadly.

On the one hand there is beatific fantasy that is deemed attractive to individuals and motivates an involvement within the discourse. Within this fantasy, however, is a need to address the horrific fantasy of an “other”. Indeed, the beatific fantasy promoted within sustainability is predicated upon and reliant on what it seeks to change. Interestingly, what is noted within the working practices of individuals at Anuvelar are reminders of the system they seek to change and influence. This manifests as a block to the perceived fulfilment offered by the beatific fantasy. Crucially, this block can be seen as a reminder of what they stand against and, effectively, maintains and reinforces their reasons for identifying with sustainability in the first place. However, it also represents the limits of what might be considered sustainable. If the tensions of growing into an organisation with diluted values,

or becoming a larger and more tightly controlled firm turn into an actual conflict this will push individuals away as the beatific fantasy of sustainability is eroded.

What becomes apparent when examining sustainability in this way is the character of sustainability as requiring an affective investment to approach the complex problems associated with maintaining a balance between pro-social/environmental and pro-financial logics. Returning to my initial question: *what is the role of affect when examining the discourse of sustainability in a contemporary organisation?* – I can say that affect, fantasy and enjoyment form an important part of the investment in sustainability by individuals within an organisation. By constructing differing camps of ‘good’ and ‘bad’ or ‘us’ and the ‘other’ allows a particular stance to be made to different forms of organising. What becomes important, therefore, is the recognition of the affective “quality” or force of the investment made by individuals. Earlier in the literature review of this paper Haugh and Talwar (2010) discussed the dilemma that:

“... (R)aising employee awareness about sustainability issues may simultaneously increase expectations about the extent of the contribution that the MNC (Multi National Corporation) can make to their resolution. The expectation-performance gap will need to be acknowledged and addressed in corporate communications.” (p393)

In a strategic piece, this comment marks out a very thoughtful acknowledgement that individuals can develop an attachment and investment with the particular character of sustainability. Moreover, that this investment can lead to contradictions and tensions as, after all, sustainability is predicated and established upon a fundamental antagonism. This paper establishes and builds upon this point and the broader literature that states the need for “human factors” and values of sustainability to be present in any implementation of sustainability (Bansal, 2003; Dunphy et al, 2003; Epstein and Buhovac, 2010). Moreover, this paper shows that even in an organisation that takes sustainability as a core value the

*“expectation-performance gap”* (Ibid: 393) can become a tricky, yet important, balancing act.

## Concluding Remarks

Fundamentally, for sustainability to “work” in organisations this investment and the forms of fantasies and affective issues of enjoyment are necessary. In joining with previous research on the antagonistic nature of sustainability which is constructed through subjects and power (Parker, 2014a) this paper shows the affective nature of sustainability within an organisation. I argue that this affective force or desire to identify and invest in the discourse of sustainability is a necessary component of creating more sustainable organisations. Although there are needs to address the form in which sustainability is articulated and promoted. What will surely make sustainability “stick” and become a prominent discourse in future years is the identification and subsequent investment or force by people in the discourse. Such articulations are not simple, as I have shown, but are needed, perhaps even more than newer and more eloquent definitions and models of what sustainability should be.

## Paper 3: Negotiating the Agonistic in Critical Management Studies: Critiquing the Critical Organisation

### Introduction

There appears to be a growing concern for “getting things done” with Critical Management Studies. In particular, there is a burgeoning interest in engaging with the performative practices of management and the refusal of Critical Management Studies’ (CMS) potentially negative sounding “non-performative intent” (Spicer et al, 2009). The idea of engaging and advocating certain sorts of management, or at least, alternative forms of organisation (Parker et al, 2014; Parker et al, 2007; Atzeni, 2012) is something that I believe CMS can contribute towards. However, there are political, pragmatic and epistemological tensions that become apparent when such an engagement is attempted, tensions which push researchers outside of their critical comfort zone. This paper details my particular loss of comfort within critical research through my experiences researching a sustainable financial services organisation. These experiences have provoked this exploration of what CMS can offer in terms of positive or agonistic engagement with organisations and management and what it has offered in the past.

CMS has long critiqued capitalist society and the various activities this encourages within organisations and management, however, this begs the question how does, or indeed can, this critique translate into action? (Cox et al, 2009). This paper contributes to the ongoing debate within CMS by exploring the negative, or antagonistic grounding of CMS that sees political insights gleaned from research to be fundamentally in conflict with management. Or, alternatively, whether research findings and the activities of CMS scholars can and should be engaged with management and organisations in a mutually beneficial fashion, which I refer to as agonistic (Mouffe, 1999, 2013). Having established both antagonistic and

agonistic approaches to critique I then apply both perspectives to data collected at a sustainable financial services company where I conducted a 6 month ethnography. Doing so raises some interesting questions about normativity, relationships between means and ends and the purpose of critique. Finally, I end by discussing the possibility of CMS engaging and advocating particular organisations as viable “alternatives” that offer a space, an object and a shared vocabulary to dialogue with academics and practitioners alike. Such a space is not a theoretical resource, but concrete instances of organisations and the discourses that inform, motivate and establish them as they seek to agonistically change the system.

Firstly, I establish the nature of CMS as a group of politically engaged researchers and engage with the various understandings of what CMS can achieve.

## Critical Management Studies: Arm chairs, soap boxes and politics

### CMS: Big Tents, Big Talk and kind of a Big Deal

Critical Management Studies (CMS) is a very diverse group of academics from a number of different academic disciplines. Despite this multi-disciplinarity most have now found homes in business schools around the world, albeit focussed mainly within Western Europe.

Theoretically fragmented and without a cumulatively derived “CMS theory” (Adler, 2008) and despite much deliberation and discussion (Adler et al, 2007; Alvesson, 2008; Alvesson, Bridgman and Willmott, 2009; Fournier and Grey, 2000) ontological assumptions, theoretical positions and methodologies vary from scholar to scholar. What appears to link CMS academics is politics. Now, I am not suggesting CMS is some sort of political party and all toe the party line, see Parker (2013) to fully consider that nightmare of control, order and



strategy. Rather, most academics that discuss CMS tend to come to the following, for want of a better word, conclusion:

“Those who associate with CMS are an amorphous group made up of people from very different traditions and ways of thinking, with perhaps a modicum of agreement in their disdain for the seamier side of capitalism” (Mills and Mills, 2013: 305)

The seamier sides of capitalism have provoked research that has stretched across a wide variety of phenomena that can be easily found with a quick hunt across the journal databases and, particularly, CMS’ “home” journal *Organization*. As Mills and Mills (2013) insinuate, although there exists an agreement between CMS scholars, it can be very tentative. There are quite a few responses to the fluid and transient identity CMS has. As this paper relates to the transformational possibilities and limits of critique it is important to properly understand the foundations of an academic community like CMS and the knowledge claims it validates. Perhaps more crucially, this needs to be explored to encourage each other to work together to improve others’ lives in a way that is not counter-productive or filled with egoistic career orientated “gap-spotting” that exploits individuals in organisations as fascinating examples of discourse and oppression (Wray-Bliss, 2003, 2004).

In a recent publication *“Dialogues in Critical Management Studies Volume 2 : Getting Things Done”* (Malin et al, 2013) Martin Parker and Hugh Willmott, who both figure prominently in CMS books and events, occupy two positions regarding the solidarity and purpose of CMS.

Willmott (2013) positions CMS as a social movement organisation, drawing a parallel to other social movements such as the Global Justice Movement. He discusses CMS’ multiple lines of division that do not demarcate clear “camps” or fixed positions and stresses the shifting alliances and movement within CMS as demonstrable of CMS’ social movement credentials. Drawing from the political theory of Ernesto Laclau (1996, 2005), Willmott discusses CMS and the Mainstream research against which it stands, as empty signifiers that

motivate action and stand as unifiers of the discursive terrain. This unification hints at the promise of a position of fullness for academic's identities both in terms of access to knowledge, but also aligning their values and political affinities. Willmott quotes Fournier and Grey (2000) and Spicer et al (2009) in explaining that CMS aims to change the field of business with regard to the types of management knowledge and subsequent influence on practices this has. In particular, he says CMS feeds off “.. *and contributes to a process of ‘normative fragmentation’ (Oliver, 1992) as it makes more evident and amplifies the existence of divergent value orientations*” (Willmott, 2013:126). Differing from Mainstream research, CMS gives voice to a marginal ideology and is not anti-management but is concerned with:

“...how it is implicated in the (re)production of specific features of contemporary society, diverse forms of domination, exploitation and subjugation in which business and management is implicated, and to which Mainstream thinking contributes by ignoring or normalising them” (Ibid: 151)

CMS, then, cannot be seen as independent of the wider milieu of business school knowledge. The reasons for this being that CMS' identity is dependent on what it is not, rather than what it is looking for, and the strength found in this position allows disparate and diverse interests to converge under a broad umbrella, like a kind of social movement. However, the messy and tense arena of a social movement is a difficult domain to determine. For example, what might be seen as an agonistic engagement with, in this instance, management? The “Occupy” movement has been one of the largest social movements in recent times. Happening in major cities around the world, the occupy movement made the world media stand up and take notice and was a useful way of determining allies and adversaries within the political milieu. The main problem with occupy, however, was when it came to “getting things done” and the scale of the demands and sheer amount of demands it held, culminating in, essentially, no feasible demands for engagement. Occupy itself stood as something that was against the mainstream, against the

banks, neo-liberalism, the government, the state, excessive growth and so on. Subsequently, Occupy had a very strong pull for many people who did not like what was going on in the world and pulled together existing social movements under a bigger umbrella. Does this not sound a bit familiar? Is CMS at risk of being a long standing Occupy movement? Certainly CMS has lasted much longer and has found its way into many business schools whilst academic awareness of CMS in other parts of universities has risen. However the similarities with regard to a lack of a refined and proclaimed demands is very similar. As Wicks (2013: 196) proclaims:

“...without a clear definition of what critical management studies is (at the same time specifying what it is not), the organizations espousing an interest in furthering certain critiques of management orthodoxy run the risk of being wildly unfocused, which in turn may reduce the need for critical management studies organizations.”

In light of such criticism Willmott (2013) does in fact show evidence, and the importance therein, of CMS positioning itself in relation to what it is not, as its identity relies on this manoeuvre. In response to the claim of being unable to articulate and define CMS, Willmott and others point to the mission statement of the Academy of Management division:

“Our premise is that structural features of contemporary society, such as the profit imperative, patriarchy, racial inequality, and ecological irresponsibility often turn organizations into instruments of domination and exploitation. Driven by a shared desire to change this situation, we aim in our research, teaching and practice to develop critical interpretations of management and society and to generate radical alternatives. Our critique seeks to connect the practical shortcomings in management and individual managers to the demands of a socially divisive and ecologically destructive system within which managers work” (Academy of Management Division & Interest Group Domain Statements, N.D)

Alluding to such a statement suggests that a certain 'we' can manifest itself as CMS, however, as Cukier et al (2013) note, the idea of CMS as a "big tent" social movement wallpapers over fractures within CMS. This papering over the cracks, and some would argue, reification of CMS as a stand-in for critical management scholarship (Mills and Mills, 2013), risks CMS becoming an ivory tent symbolising and espousing an orthodoxy of contrarianism. Within this ivory tent Parker (2013) suggests there would not exist a 'we' of CMS. Instead, huddled around a found wood stove of fairtrade coffee, the CMS movement has only blossomed into a lucrative support network for "*sensitive teenagers*" writing "*notebooks full of bad poetry that no-one else will read*" (Parker, 2013: 168). Indeed Parker is incredibly pessimistic as to any sort of 'we' within CMS. Parker sees the freedom of criticism in CMS as being the thing that ties everything together and is thus a virtue of CMS. But, unfortunately, it is the reason why nothing can ever been done due to the subsequent quagmire of discourse and epistemological positioning that happens within this freedom:

"There isn't a thing called CMS – if we define it tightly following a model of party organization which might actually have a chance of achieving substantial changes, then it can't fit our definitions" (Parker, 2013: 179)

This comment, and Parker's entire chapter, is built around a comparison between CMS and Vladimir Lenin's strategy for maintaining party discipline, which is meant to provoke reaction and is not necessarily a proposal for CMS' new direction. Nonetheless, he does make fair comments about the current practices of CMS researchers and their penchant for the academic, opposed to the practical and "performative":

"If CMS work was consistently engaging with alternative organisations, anti-employer struggles, anti-capitalist protests and so on then a characterization as a social movement which is concerned to change the world might work, but most of it isn't, so it doesn't" (p177)

Evidently, Parker is pessimistic at best for the hopes of CMS doing anything in its current form. The reason for which, he argues, is that CMS can never have a collective “we”. If it did, it would no longer be the CMS that many are aware of today, although it might, I argue, be more identifiable from the Academy of Management domain statement cited earlier.

Despite Parker’s cynicism, recently there has been a surge in research that engages directly with the practices of management and organisations in their day-to-day problems and endeavours. Such an endeavour opposes the idea that CMS is for launching negative comments from a safe and comfortable distance (Spicer et al, 2009; Clegg et al, 2003) and is at the centre of what this paper seeks to explore. CMS started as a youthful critical theory inspired project that focussed on subjectivity and the self far more than the labour process theory that brought it kicking and screaming into the world. After a tricky birth, so the story goes, it hit the puberty of postmodernism, of potential nihilism and perennial movement/confusion but produced wonderful paradigm shifting stories and creativity. Now, as CMS academics have noticed (e.g Malin et al, 2013), CMS has become a bit middle aged. It also appears to be experiencing an existential moment, asking: “what do I want?”<sup>12</sup>

In response to this question, critical management scholars addressing notions of “critical performativity” (e.g. Spicer et al, 2009) or “alternative organisations” (e.g. Parker et al, 2013) have developed the beginnings of an answer. Yet, there is still the lingering negativity of a CMS that refuses to engage and prefers to stick to what it does best, namely, critique. In the following paper I establish and explore both sides of the spectrum theoretically and empirically. Starting firstly with research that take an antagonistic position towards organisations and research before addressing the new wave of work that takes a more

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<sup>12</sup> With regards to who or what is this CMS that asks the questions and has a crisis of purpose, I would answer that it is not a single entity and much like an organisation, especially one like CMS that is loosely held together and messy, it is transient, fluid and a process. This processual approach to organisations, treating one as “*..both noun and verb*” (Parker, 2000: 232) is a commonly held perspective in CMS research.

agonistic approach. In doing so, I contribute theoretical weight to the new approaches to critical management research as well as demonstrate, through use of empirical data, the difficulties and possibilities of productive and agonistic critique.

Before I go on to explore, what I have termed, the antagonistic and agonistic approaches within CMS, I firstly want to unpack exactly what I mean by each term. Until now, I have briefly summarised the difference between the two as agonistic approaches being positive and antagonistic being negative. Although, this understanding is partially correct, in terms of the attempt to positively or negatively engage with a political object or system. In order to return to these ideas after my analysis, in the following section I explore the theoretical and political basis for each term through the political theory of Chantal Mouffe (1999, 2013, 2014).

### Agonism and Antagonism/'The Political' and 'Politics'

Having established CMS as a fluid and yet prominent force for attempting to create change in organisations and management practices, it is worthwhile framing and unpacking the terms agonism and antagonism as terms that address this political engagement. In the case of CMS, this political engagement is predominantly undertaken through the writing of research concerning organisations and management. Underpinning the majority of CMS research there are broadly held assumptions about the nature of reality, the constitutive role of language and the subsequent relationship language has to power. Although there are various forms and schisms in which these concepts are entwined the nature of language as being without an essential foundation (post-foundational) means that subsequent knowledge, communicated through language in the form of books and journal publications,

and the political content of this knowledge must also be considered post-foundational. This post-foundational position:

“..draws on an epistemological doctrine suggesting that no knowledge is ever certain, that all knowledge claims must apply to a web of meanings that constitute knowledge and that the relationship between philosophical foundations, research methods and research topics is always contingent.” (Pekka-Sorsa, 2013: 187)

Such a position is echoed in the work of Chantal Mouffe concerning agonism, antagonism, ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ (1999, 2013, 2014). In particular, she acknowledges that there is no final ground or foundation for knowledge or politics, there is only contingency.

Subsequently, every society is the *“product of practices that seek to institute an order in a context of contingency”* (Mouffe, 2014: 151). Such an order is referred to as hegemony, a struggle to fix meanings in a certain way (Laclau and Mouffe, 1984). In Mouffe’s work on the political theory of agonistic democracy she contends that there is a distinction between, on the one hand, ‘politics’, which are comprised of ontic/concrete political struggles (such as interventions and recommendations based on CMS research). Whilst on the other, ‘the political’ which pertains to the ontological level of contingency and a subsequent recognition of the political nature of research (something which is largely agreed upon by the CMS community). Theoretically, Mouffe (1999: 754) develops, ‘the political’ as being full of antagonisms that are inherent in all human society, a position built upon her earlier work on hegemony with Ernesto Laclau (Laclau and Mouffe, 1984). ‘Politics’, on the other hand:

*“refers to the ensemble of practices, discourses and institutions that seek to establish a certain order and to organize human coexistence in conditions that are always potentially conflictual because they are affected by the dimension of ‘the political’”* (Mouffe, 1999: 754).

‘Politics’, therefore, relates to an attempt to domesticate hostility that stems from the (‘political’) nature of human relations and to create some form of unity within a (‘political’) context of conflict and diversity (Ibid: 755). To link back to the discussion by Willmott (2013),

CMS can be seen as an attempt to stand as an umbrella term politically, at least, that attempts to provide unity through diversity. Moreover, the conflict and diversity of 'the political' may be the reason Parker (2013) sees no unity at all.

The relationship between 'the political', as an ontological terrain wrought with antagonisms and conflict and 'politics', an arena whereby these conflicts are partially tamed, brings us to the discussion of the two political positions of agonism and antagonism. Writing in 2014, Mouffe states:

"The agonistic confrontation is different from the antagonistic one, not because it allows for possible consensus but because the opponent is not considered an enemy to be destroyed but an adversary whose existence is perceived as legitimate" (p150-151)

This understanding of the differences between antagonism, which is seen as a fervent "us" and "them" or a friend/enemy relation, and agonism, a relationship between adversaries. Linking back to Willmott (2013), in both instances there is the development of a "we", an "us" or a "friend", through establishing an "enemy" or an "adversary". What antagonism and agonism points to is the nature of this relationship in terms of engagement and subsequent struggles. Opposed to an antagonistic relation that seeks immediacy of action against the enemy, agonism proposes an on-going confrontation with an adversary. Although the adversary's existence is perceived as legitimate, antagonisms are still prevalent within human relations ('the political') and fuel the on-going confrontations by, in a way, being converted into agonistic approaches (Mouffe, 1999: 755).

Nonetheless, as a political position, antagonism is one which seeks immediate action against an "enemy" and rejects any form of compromise (Stavrakakis, 2014). Agonism, on the other hand, seeks to mobilise critique and political discussion in order to challenge an "adversary" on their terms. In order to challenge and change, in this case, neo-liberal/capitalist relations organisations:



“it is not enough to organise new forms of existence of the common, outside the dominant capitalist structures, as if the latter would progressively ebb away without any confrontation” (Mouffe, 2013: 115-116)

In so doing, agonistic struggles expand the sites and possibilities for political engagement by constructing discourses and projects that oppose, not *reject*, the dominant system. In the following section, firstly, I explore and latterly analyse antagonistic approaches that seek an enemy and immediate action and in some cases dismissal of anything stemming from the enemy. Secondly, I explore the burgeoning agonistic approaches within CMS that seek to engage and work with management and organisations, albeit maintaining a critical edge. Crucially, what lies at the heart of either antagonistic or agonistic approaches to research is some sort of normative content, a view of what is wanted, be it utopian or the exposure and exploration of the dystopian state of affairs. What is evident, currently and most certainly historically in CMS research is a heavy weighting towards antagonism, negativity and dystopia. However, agonistic politics, positivity, engagement and alternatives appear to be on the horizon, increasing their potency.

### CMS: Antagonistic Comfort and Agonistic Engagement

The publication of a book within CMS relating to “Getting things done” (Malin et al, 2013) points to a change in direction from the, what is seen as, armchair critique of times past. CMS has had many existential moments, or crises of purpose throughout the years (e.g. Grice and Humphreys, 1997; Wray-Bliss, 2003, 2004). However, one of the most recent provocations has come through an attack by Spicer et al (2009) on the idea of non-performative intent articulated by Fournier and Grey (2000). Spicer et al (2009) in following through with the idea of performative critique do not just deplore non-performative intent

but actually propose a “fix” and a change of focus for CMS, namely, for it to become more performative and engaged with management. In this section, I will briefly outline the positions on both antagonistic and the more agonistic sides of CMS research. Naturally, the boundaries between both are fluid and I will have to simplify many different approaches around a dichotomy that stands in for a great deal of complexity.

### Antagonistic Comfort: Non-performative Intent

“People in ivory towers shouldn’t throw stones, yet (if they want to be ‘critical’) throwing stones is all they can ever do” (Parker, 2003: 210)

It appears that it is far easier being against something than for something. It is far easier to pinpoint a hate figure, something that is not “us” something that we can all channel anger, distaste and loathing towards. Group psychology, political theory, sociology, psychoanalysis all point towards the idea of the Other, the thing that is not what we are, does not stand for what we stand for, who is wrong and evil (see Parker, 2014a, 2014b). Now, I realise I am oversimplifying a huge amount of academic endeavour and perhaps trivialising some very serious issues that are indeed deplorable in our current neo-liberal capitalist business world. However, it does appear to be easier to appear intelligent and be published by being antagonistic, grasping the latest technology of capitalist indoctrination and publishing it quickly. It is also much easier to have/produce a normative stance when it concerns something that we are against as is evident in much CMS research since one of its seminal books published in 1992 (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992).

As the following two sections will show, on both sides of the antagonistic and agonistic divide the notion of performative intent is a key concept to be debated. From an antagonistic perspective it was first articulated in Fournier and Grey (2000) as:

“The intent to develop and celebrate knowledge which contributes to the production of maximum output for minimum input” (p180 – citing Lyotard, 1984)

Fournier and Grey (2000) see mainstream research as taking performative intent to be its *raison d’être* and thus management is seen as a given and even a desirable activity. Indeed, it is the best technology to deploy in pursuit of efficiency, profit maximisation and other such organisational goals. In mainstream research, this idea of performativity (as the means of achieving the naturalized ends of the organisation) is seen as the acid test of whether knowledge has any value. The perspective developed by Fournier and Grey (2000) establishes a position of non-performative intent for CMS, which relates to an attempted challenge to this lack of critical reflection over the ends of an organisation.

However, it is important to note, as some scholars appear to have forgotten, Fournier and Grey (2000) actually discuss two positions that CMS research can take with regard to the problematic nature of performative intent. One position, a position that has subsequently been critiqued by scholars proposing critical performativity (Spicer et al, 2009; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012) and Critical Realists (e.g. Thompson, 2004) is a flat out rejection of research that supports management in any form. This stance, taking a more structural critique, sees management as irredeemably corrupt as it is embroiled within performative principles and a system that CMS should seek to problematise and challenge. Subsequently, CMS research from this position should seek to undermine management through critique and should continually distance itself from any meaningful engagement due to the fear of CMS being co-opted into a dominant managerial discourse. From this antagonistic position performativity should only be engaged with to ascertain: “*..what is being done in its name*”

(Fournier and Grey, 2000: 180). It is from this position that we find our stream of negativity and antagonism towards mainstream research, management and contemporary organisations.

This position, treating management as irredeemably corrupt and troubling, was subsequently seized upon by critics of CMS (Thompson, 2004) and by CMS researchers who were concerned that this position is untenable if CMS is to actually make a difference to management practices and organisational activities (Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Clegg et al, 2003; Parker et al, 2014; Spicer et al, 2009; Tadjewski, 2010). This lack of engagement was seen as especially problematic considering the growth and presence of CMS within the academy in America and the established critical scholars in Western Europe. Many of who had built a reputation upon vehement critique, but offered fewer alternatives or proposals as to what they would like to see. Problematisation, deconstruction and various other frameworks that seemed to focus more on “denaturalizing” (Fournier and Grey, 2000) the status quo, in order to expose modes of domination and marginalized voices, were leaving nothing to actively engage with organisational members, management or otherwise (Wray-Bliss, 2003, 2004). Furthermore, critics drew attention to the tendency for such critique to exist purely within academic settings such as conferences and journal papers with scant regard for pragmatic engagements with practices within organisations and management.

The antagonism in CMS has run from the seminal works on CMS (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992) to the work on identity regulation and control (Alvesson and Willmott, 2002) through various other avenues, contexts and phenomena. Although there have been many attempts to push research in a more agonistic direction (Clegg et al, 2003; Jacques, 1999), they have not materialised in actual research that engages positively with management or organisations (Cukier et al, 2013). Subsequently, negativity is still prevalent in recent CMS research, often inspired by the in vogue work of Boltanski and Chiapello (2005) and their

thesis that sees resistance of workers co-opted into the capitalist system. In Boltanski and Chiapello we are confronted with apocalyptic dread as even rebellion is captured by the capitalist forces, re-branded and then sold back to workers to encourage “authentic” identities which they might polish in front of their Che Guevara posters (Fleming, 2009; Fleming and Spicer, 2003; Spicer and Fleming, 2007). Parker et al (2014:368-369) comment specifically about Boltanski and Chiapello inspired research, but this critique could arguably speak to prior fondness for the various versions of Marx, Foucault, Habermas and Bourdieu:

“..one significant risk with critical projects explaining (away) all forms of resistance is that they unintentionally construct closed circuits ... In this way, critical scepticism bordering on certainty, however informed by data and examples, can ironically mirror or, worse, support the ‘inevitability’ posture of apologists for the status quo. Social imagination is ultimately the loser in such a match of predominant system with domineering critique, or with an endless discovery of reasons why change is flawed” (p368-369)

This new vein of negativity, suggests a familiar comfort for the CMS scholar. A situation whereby it is possible to spot co-optation and demonstrate “*one’s cleverness and intellectual mastery of capitalism*” (Parker et al, 2014: 368). This leads to a certain cynical distance from engagement with management and a lack of commitment to the possibilities of different forms of organizing that are possible.

One redeeming quality of the negativity within CMS is a very obvious and well established normative commitment. As discussed at the beginning of this section, being against something is not only easier but also, in terms of the political and politics, it is more potent to organize around something which you are against. Despite the accusations of comfort and inactivity in terms of engagement with management and forms of organizing it is very clear as to what antagonistic CMS research is trying to achieve. Be it against management,

against capitalism or inequality, antagonistic approaches have a far more solid and maintained normative content and approach.

Engagement, and what is termed critical performativity in the following section, enters into a far trickier, fluid and agonistic domain.

### A Step Towards Agonistic Engagement: (Critical) Performativity

‘...rejection of managerial, market capitalist relations constitutes simultaneous rejection of the basis for engagement’ (Jacques, 1999: 212)

The idea of agonistic CMS research is not one that has recently appeared. It was apparent from the outset of CMS, it just did not seem to catch on. Fournier and Grey did propose a second position regarding performative intent. This position is one that would resonate and reinforce a need for CMS research to engage with organisational members and management. The aim of CMS, in this instance is to develop more humane forms of management and less socially divisive forms of management theories and practices. Inspired by Watson (1994) and Anthony (1998) and the concerns they develop promoting dialogue and relevance to managerial/organisational concerns, Fournier and Grey offered a tentative proposal for engagement. This second position steps outside of academic conferences and the hermeneutically sealed self-referential intellectualism it perpetuates. In particular, they quote the, then, Habermas inspired Alvesson and Willmott, who offer a certain performative engagement with management and organisations and warn CMS scholars:

“..not to indulge in the Utopian project of eliminating hierarchy, removing specialist divisions of labour or even abolishing the separation of management and other forms of work. Rather, its aspiration is to foster the development of organisations in which communications (and productive

potential) are progressively less distorted by socially oppressive, asymmetrical relations of power” (1996: 18)

Fournier and Grey having proposed this potentiality then partially retreat to their initial antagonistic position and raise concerns that, in positively engaging with management, CMS could become co-opted into a new toolkit for management. In particular, they highlight the tensions in seeing CMS as a search for “better” management. Fournier and Grey fall back to a position that places the majority of the value of CMS research in informing teaching within business schools. Indeed they believe this is the best way to intervene in management practices. This position has been built upon by other scholars (Contu, 2009; Delbridge, 2014; Grey, 2004; Cunliffe et al, 2002) who are still very committed to pushing through business education from a critical position. Operating within universities, CMS scholars have an audience of young potential managers to educate. By exposing our students to alternative conceptions of the doing business or organising there is an opportunity to encourage gradual change as each generation of students graduate. However, considering the arguments put forward by others regarding co-optation of critical knowledge or “artistic critique” and the request for critical and radical managers. There are concerns laced with the suspicion that a few short years at university may not consistently change the way a person sees the world (Wicks, 2013), with many students pursuing the path of least resistance once inside the corporate world (Parker et al, 2014). Subsequently, many have asked: should not our focus look to engage with management and organisations directly?

In addition to the work that done in other disciplines and the various work, non-governmental organisations and charities that critical scholars are involved with, foundations are being built that seek to build CMS’ potential to engage and intervene directly with management practices. Moving beyond a pedagogic strategy that hopes to echo loudly enough in the ears and minds of alumni in graduate schemes, this would be an

approach that would positively engage and work from within management. As introduced at the start of this section, performative approaches are burgeoning within CMS that seek to go beyond pedagogy. It is to these pragmatic engagements with the performativity of management I shall now turn.

Building upon and “updating” the 2<sup>nd</sup> position proposed by Fournier and Grey (2000) are a group of scholars that are concerned with critical performativity (Spicer et al, 2009; Alvesson and Spicer, 2012; Tadajewski, 2010; Alvesson et al, 2012). Critical performativity (CP) is proposed as a way of progressing CMS from an antagonistic engagement with management. Critical performativists aim to engage actively and pragmatically within specific debates about management. Concerned about the negativity of CMS, CP scholars lament the ability of CMS to put forward a firm claim as what it actually wants (Bohm, 2005 – quoted in Spicer et al, 2009). Furthermore, they claim that CMS has attempted to cause the death of management without taking responsibility for what is replacing it (Fleming and Spicer, 2003 – quoted in Spicer et al, 2009). In summary, CP seeks to combat the perceived righteousness of critique and attempts to promote social change; to add an affirmative movement alongside the perceived negative movement of CMS (Spicer et al, 2009: 538).

To do this CP scholars have to first clarify what they mean when they discuss performativity. Spicer et al (2009) challenge Fournier and Grey’s (2000) conceptualisation of performativity as a concept that relates purely to efficiency and the various knowledges that may then be legitimised by the technical value associated with producing results. Rather, they believe performativity involves an active intervention into discourse and practice. Spicer et al (2009) start to refine their version of performativity with J.L. Austin (1963) and the importance of how some words, for example, “I sentence you to death” or “you are now married” create a social fact and are not purely a description of what is happening. Going further into a more



post-structural and discursive approach they then quote Butler (1993: 225) and her discussion of performative acts:

“Performative acts are forms of authoritative speech; most performatives, for instance, are statements that, in the uttering, also perform a certain action and exercise a binding power”

Butler, following on from a Foucauldian understanding of discourse, argues that discourses need to be made performative and by doing so opens up a space where it is possible to be reworked. This understanding of a more performative interaction within and with discourse points to the possibility of discourse being *“actively used, parodied and changed rather than just how they are fitted with existing meaning structures”* (Spicer et al, 2009: 544)

This performative possibility suggests a different approach to CMS research. Although acknowledging the ever-present aspects of critical research such as; scrutiny of forms of domination and encouraging emancipation and resistance (Alvesson, 2008), CP recognises the *“need to appreciate the contexts and constraints of management”* (Spicer et al, 2009: 545). To do this they position CP as fundamentally pragmatic, involving care, respect and encouraging reflection for both the researcher and researched. Furthermore, this pragmatic zeal should be present in engaging affirmatively with management and “what works”.

Proposing something that “works” presents an interesting problem for the critical performativists, as the normative content of such an engagement produces more questions than an actual position to agree on what might work for managers and critical scholars. The best way to explore both the antagonistic and the potential for agonistic critique in CMS is through an application of the different approaches to management and organisation. This is also an effort to avoid the irony of critiquing critique purely through critique and not stepping out of the “academic sphere” into a place where engagement can happen.

Considering this, I will now present a part of an ethnography I undertook at a sustainable financial services organisation. This case presents a number of problems for critique within

CMS. It is one that raises some interesting questions for antagonistic critique and for agonistic critique it allows an opportunity to show its relevance and ability to engage.

Firstly, I give a background to what the organisation does before providing a vignette of a typical working day. This vignette shows the unique nature of the organisation but raises issues often problematized by CMS regarding management, managerialism and issues of identity.

### My Problem: Anulevar

Anuvelar is a financial services organisation that deals in sustainable investments in renewable energy, organic farming and various charity organisations and faith groups. They have a very simple model whereby they take investments from individuals who want interest on their money but want it invested in ethical or sustainable projects. Anuvelar ensure this happens and show their customers this by being transparent and open about every investment project they support.

Over the past 20 years, Anuvelar has grown from a small entrepreneurial group of investors to an organisation with 90 employees in the UK and they still maintain transparency and sustainability as part of their organisational practices. It is not only equity or finance that Anuvelar now offer, due to their experience and longevity in the field they now play a key facilitator role and have a great deal of knowledge and networks that burgeoning businesses utilise with great effect. Consequently, Anulevar is not a typical sustainable organisation it is a central hub of various sustainable organisations that is now spanning the width of Europe and into Africa.

They see themselves as thought leaders attempting to change consumer attitudes towards finance and to promote the use of capital as a way of changing the unsustainable nature of

many of the large financial institutions, but also big business and large corporations. In the following I provide a vignette of a Monday morning at Anuvelar. This extract is compiled from my ethnographic notes and hopefully provides the reader with a glimpse into what it is like to work at Anuvelar Investments. Yet, at the same time provides interesting insights into instances of managing and work that are easily critiqued and deplored through a CMS lens.

### A Monday Morning in Anuvelar

*Monday morning, I fly down the hill on my second-hand bike (bought from green-bike company – an Anuvelar customer) to a beautiful part of the city where the UK branch of Anuvelar is located. I turn and go underneath one of the most sustainable buildings in Europe into the car park. There are only 4 spaces allocated to Anuvelar for cars, 2 are for visitors, and I lock my bike with the other forty or so. Some are fancy racing bikes, others with baskets on, some are even as scruffy as mine. Other co-workers jog in, catch the train or, as a director mentioned: “If I have to dress up in a tie I have to catch a bus, it’s a shame”.*

*A quick flash of my key card and the basement door opens, I go straight on and then turn left into the changing room and I’m greeted by smiles from colleagues and a great deal of warmth from the “drying room”; it hasn’t stopped raining for two weeks. Then it’s upstairs to the 1<sup>st</sup> floor and to continue my brief stay with HR.*

*I’m currently working with HR on their “on-boarding” process, getting new co-workers excited about coming to work for such an environmentally caring and “alternative” organisation. I sit down at my PC, thanks to the sixty eight page booklet I was given on my arrival I know that the fabric in my chair is made from 65% nettle and that my desk is made from 100% sustainably sourced wood, it is very nice too with its slight imperfections and*

rustic sturdiness. I also know that the electricity used to power my PC, the lights and the coffee machine – fairtrade and organic of course – is all sourced from a renewable energy supplier who are also a customer. I go through some emails, my responses by default are in a green font and chased quickly by the latest Anuvelar activities at the end of each email. I wasn't in the office on Friday as I was visiting a customer specialising in organic muesli so I have a look at the "daily news" email that is sent to everyone around mid-morning every day. It comes from marketing and picks up stories about Anuvelar in the media and also highlights some of the evil-doings of other financial services companies and banks. For example, Barclay's food prospecting, Natwest funding cluster bombs, Standard Chartered money laundering all got a healthy going over during my time and are fuel for discussion at lunchtime. My HR colleague is a very committed conservationist and today has printed out a picture of a cute looking and critically endangered cross-river gorilla. He is encouraging me to print off my own endangered species to remind me and others as to why we work here. I print out a picture of an endangered grasshopper, just to ensure that less cute animals get a good airing. My co-workers tend to prefer the Gorilla picture but I am quite happy to back the less aesthetically pleasing cause. A co-worker from compliance comes down and jokes that we shouldn't personalise our desk space and that we should take them down. This strikes me as a bit odd, apparently there is a policy on this, we ignore it anyway. Behind me are the customer service team, they have big TV monitors showing incoming calls, who is currently taking a call and who is currently in down time – writing up what a call was about. Of all the places in the office the customer services team are most obviously "managed", both in terms of managerial processes and via the use of technology due to the routine nature of their work. Since the customer service manager moved to Anuvelar from a mainstream financial services company she has been focussed on consistency, professionalism and above all efficiency. I recall back to an interview with her:

*“When I arrived here, it was a mess. There was no filing, no system for logging complaints, just lots of paper stacked up in a basement somewhere. The phone would ring 3 times before anyone would answer.. I was like: ‘wow, this has to change’. I have spent a lot of my time changing a lot of the processes here. Now, I think we are far more professional and that is a good thing if we want to continue growing like we are”*

*As it comes up to 9:30am we all make our way up to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor for the co-worker meeting that happens every Monday. There are lifts, but most take the stairs; for fitness reasons I think, although I never enquired as to whether it was an environmental impact thing. When you get up to the 4<sup>th</sup> floor you are greeted by some graffiti-style art, similar to what is on show in reception containing the words “more Green, less Greed”. A quick scan of my key card and I enter into the 4<sup>th</sup> floor “co-worker” space. Two fruit bowls of biodynamic, or at least organic, fruit greet me as I walk into the room which are sat on a long counter that also is home to the coffee machine. A guitar sits next to books about ecology and the economy and various green awards and plants on a shelving unit. The furniture would not look out of place in an upmarket, yet rustic, café or bookshop in a posh part of London. Bean bags are on the floor, brightly coloured (and sustainably sourced) chairs are set around coffee tables at one end of the room and down the other are more traditional looking tables and chairs for people to eat their lunch or breakfast. Towards this end of the room there is the main meeting area which resembles the bridge of a large boat. Chairs are set up in an arc and people are slowly filtering in and chatting. Everyone is mainly smart with shirts and suit trousers. The odd t shirt is visible, none with logos on however, that is against the dress code. I’m in a shirt as I had some “feedback” that I wasn’t looking as smart as was expected in my H & M sustainable t shirt and that I should try and wear a shirt now and again.*

*The co-worker meeting is a space to hear about, disseminate and reflect upon the great work that the various departments are doing. It could be an update from the renewables team about a new wind farm purchased in Scotland or an update from the investments team*

*about a new housing project underway. Most of the time the projects aren't just supported financially by Anuvelar, the projects are helped on their way by Anuvelar co-workers and experts. The co-worker meetings are a very uplifting experience and are a way of really engaging with the great projects and achievements of the organisation. The majority of co-workers look forward to every Monday morning as a real motivator for the rest of the week and it is easy to understand why.*

*Today's session is a human resources session looking at co-worker satisfaction and the responses to a survey that happened 6 months ago. This has been a difficult project as many key issues came up in the survey regarding advancement; due to the small size of the organisation and also concerns regarding "headcount" which is a method the organisation uses to divide labour and to ensure that there was a significant amount of surplus work before new co-workers were brought in. Both were sticky issues within the organisation and were being dealt with and discussed openly within the group at the co-worker meeting.*

*At the end of the meeting, today's lasted a bit longer than others- there isn't a time limit – the managing director brings the question and answer session to a close and invites a member from the presenting team to read out a short reflective passage that is read at every Monday morning meeting. We then all leave the room and head back down to our desks.*

*When my HR colleague and I return to the pictures of our respective endangered species he starts to talk to me about what the co-worker meetings are about:*

*"It is predominantly about getting people to engage in what we do, about tapping into the commitment people have for the environment or organics or renewable energy"*

*"All the sustainable stuff?" I reply.*

*"Yea, there are so many people who are so involved in all these things. Of course there are some who are less interested, but we want to get them all on-board and energised by the great work that we do. I mean, how can you not be excited by what we do?"*

*Within Anuvelar there are various camps of people who are engaged with different aspects of what can loosely be termed “sustainability”. Some champion renewable energy, others hold dear organic food and are against the use of pesticides in farming. Other members of the organisation value cultural and spiritual expression and focus more on social and human elements of sustainability. Whereas others look to change the way people think about and use money within everyday society. I could go on with the various positions people occupy within Anuvelar, and of course the few members who are quite happy to just to work in a nicer atmosphere than some of the more corporate financial firms. But it is clear to see that, although sustainability ties many of these thoughts, feelings and activities together, it is not a homogeneous force within the organisation. Rather, the organisation attempts to “unify through diversity”, as a senior manager discussed with me at length. This unification is by no means easy and is premised upon an active participation in discussion, which can get quite heated. It involves more than just a person’s job role or responsibility and accountability. Individual’s take these concerns with them beyond their work. It is a difficult and different method of engagement.*

*As usual on a Monday morning the managing director is now walking around the office talking to people. He seems to know everyone’s name and they respond with jokes, quips and information about their weekend.*

*“Hello Simon, still managing to do some work?” he asks.*

*“Just about..” I laugh.*

*A “daily news” email arrives in my inbox: “Alternative Finance: what are the options for the everyday consumer?” – an article by the Guardian will more than likely feature in our lunch time chats.*

## Reflections

My time at Anuvelar was challenging for many reasons, not only did I have to learn banking terminology on the fly, I was also thoroughly pushed outside of my comfort zone as a antagonistic “critical researcher”. When I set up this research I secretly wanted this “sustainable” organisation to be a PR bubble that I could gleefully pop with all the zeal of those critical greats who had gone before me. I wanted to see over-worked and over-committed employees typing until their fingers bled. To observe resistance against tyrannical management or the hegemonic discourse of neo-liberalism filling up the social reality of the office with hypocrisy, ripe for the critiquing. Sadly, I observed no such thing. Having left the field I was able to be more critical of what the organisation does and some of the activities of its management. However, I could not really commit to my critique. My overwhelming thoughts were that Anuvelar Investments, in their challenging and transparent ways, were probably doing a better job of resisting neo-liberal corporations than the critical research of which CMS is a part. They actually proposed something, their critique was interwoven with their actions as a sustainable investments company. They were “getting things done”.

In the following section I analyse this organisation and some of the activities and behaviours that were apparent in Anuvelar through two different lenses. The first being an antagonistic CMS lens, focussing on domination, sceptical in regard to performativity and antagonistic towards management. The second lens draws upon the more agonistic inclinations of the critical performativists. Although comforting me slightly in terms of a fairer treatment of an organisation that has the intention to do “good”, critical performativity, lacks the normative commitment so evident in the antagonistic CMS research from which it grew.



## Applying the two perspectives:

### Antagonistic CMS: Non-Performative Intent

It is possible to envisage a reading of Anuvelar from an antagonistic CMS perspective. Going back to the Monday morning vignette, this form of critical research would seek to challenge management and managerialism in its many forms. For example; notions of efficiency brought up by the customer services manager stand at the cornerstone of performative intent and therefore can be critiqued. The customer contact team is essentially a smaller version of a call centre, of which critical research has managed to craft a significant foothold (see Knights and McCabe, 2003). Furthermore, the use of technology to monitor activity is another candidate for critique as scholars within critical information systems and technology research would testify (Brooke, 2009). The tricky issue of “headcount” within the organisation could be challenged from a critical human resource management position (Townley, 1994). As a process of objectifying individuals as resources, subsequently forcing individuals to work to their limit before the possibility of gaining additional help. Something which could (and did) cause undue stress and often led to overwork. The most fervent critique from this position would be reserved for issues regarding identity and subjectivity. Informed by Alvesson and Willmott (2002) and others (Barker, 1993; Du Gay, 1996) we could discuss the ways in which management’s attempt to get employees engaged with the goals and ethos of the organisation is an attempted indoctrination and regulation of identity..

Moreover, bringing this possible critique up to date it is possible to turn to writers discussing neo-normative control and ideas regarding authenticity. For instance, trying to ‘unify through diversity’ can be seen as an attempt to engender authentic ownership, to harness the zeal and passion that Anuvelar members have for the environment in order to become more profitable and efficient. It is possible to conclude that this represents an insidious sort

of activity which breaches the boundaries between work and free time, promotes the delusion of “being yourself”, and is a plain case of neo-normative control (Fleming and Spicer, 2003, 2008; Fleming and Sturdy, 2009). In summary, this organisation is reproducing certain aspects of contemporary organizing, it is part of a dangerous system, it needs to be critiqued.

One thing that the more antagonistic version of CMS has, however, is a fervent commitment to critique. Management is inherently problematic, organisations enable management through power (or the technologies to negotiate a position of power) and more money than those “managed”. Analysing Anuvelar from this perspective feels much easier and it has a clear purpose: management is problematic and organisations become spaces where indoctrination, overwork and stress manifest. This is a clear purpose, it is antagonistic towards management and organisations, it is easier and it is often angry and usually expertly linked to theory and woven with empirical evidence (Wray-Bliss, 2003, 2004). Indeed, it is as if critique is an end in and of itself, leading to more criticism of criticisms past and present.

“..criticism becomes its own reward, but a poisonous and melancholy reward since it can only lead to further critical engagements which attempt to avoid either handwringing about the dreadfulness of the present or grand utopian dreams of the future” (Parker, 2003: 206-207)

This endless rehearsal of being critical has been a lucrative avenue for publication as many CMS academics have experienced with benefits including professorships, salaries (Marens, 2013) and a greater presence in various academies. Phillips (2006:30) expresses this worrying fact rather well:

“Somehow, CMS has gone from the margin to the centre without making much in the way of difference en route!”

Of course, the institutionalisation of CMS, its movement from margin to centre, is a sign of success and relevance. However, echoing the words of Uncle Ben from Spiderman and

Voltaire “*with great(er) power, comes great responsibility*” (*my brackets*). This is a sentiment clearly shared by the critical performativists and their need to finish off CMS’ work and although handwringing appears to have been cut down to a minimum, grand utopian dreams for the future are a long way off. In the following I will discuss a reading of Anuvelar from an agonistic perspective, particularly, drawing from the work on critical performativity by Spicer et al (2009)

### Agonistic CMS: Critical Performativity

A reading of Anuvelar from the perspective of critical performativity would start, unlike the more antagonistic position outlined previously, with an affirmative stance and what Spicer et al (2009) call an “ethic of care” (originally developed by Gilligan, 1982). Having gained critical intimacy (Spivak, 1999:425) through my ethnography the task will then be to proceed from my informant’s practices and experiences and then expand these through “*selective and informed critical-constructive questioning*” (Spicer et al, 2009: 546). An “ethic of care” relates to a care for participants views yet at the same time seeking to challenge their thinking. Interestingly Spicer et al (2009) develop critical performativity by drawing from Actor Network Theory (Latour, 1987, 2005). This is evident with two direct citations to Latour regarding the treatment of the organisation as a set of systems and actors with different interests and logics. In addition to this understanding of an organisation the

authors demonstrate a strikingly Latourian approach to politics quoting Czarniawska (2005: 159):

“..as researchers it is our moral right to reveal everything that harms people or makes them suffer. At the same time I believe that researchers have no moral right to decide that something is wrong or absurd if the involved actors do not think so.”

Such a position would not sit well with most critical researchers and suggests that it is not the researcher’s job to consider a better way of organising and privileges the status quo, something that CMS has long fought to disrupt. Spicer et al (2009) do use this quote to point towards the difficulty in balancing the dilemma referred to by Alvesson and Deetz (2000) as the line between researcher as “elite/a priori” or “emergent/local”. Nonetheless, it does raise questions as to how critical and political a critical performativity approach would be when considering the local and emergent position actor network theory proposes (see Whittle and Spicer, 2008; Alcadipani and Hassard, 2010). For instance, within the Anuvelar case, as none of the organisational members appeared distressed or hinted towards any form of suffering my role, as the researcher, should be to document (“affirmatively”, “pragmatically” and with an “ethic of care”) what is happening within the complex system that is the organisation. Description and staying close to emergent practices, it appears, is required for good performative research which, when considering the advice of being less “theory-led” (Spicer et al, 2009: 549) and to shake off the “weighty intellectual baggage”(Ibid) gradually there is a sense that critical performativity may be becoming more and more Latourian and therefore, arguably, less critical, in character. However, critical performativity, although dabbling in the ideas of actor network theory, does not stay there. Rather than becoming transfixed by an emergent ontology and the tracing of actors and actants, it aims to be critical in discussing the need to “attend to potentialities” such as heterotopias and instances of resistance and to have a strong “normative orientation”. This is where, as mentioned previously, it is the duty of the critical performativist to engage with

instances of social domination, to go beyond the pragmatic engagement and description of managerial and organisational practices and to consider instances of emancipation, resistance and whether activities are to be considered good or bad.

This focus upon aspects of emancipation and social domination raise interesting questions regarding what might be determined as such. Furthermore, from what basis might it be possible to say that something is dominating or emancipatory? Whether something is good or bad? The critical performativists already have a partial answer, an answer that could be politely termed “work-in-progress” or more harshly critiqued as a “cop-out” and a reliance on critical scholars filling in the blanks themselves. In order to perform affirmative, pragmatic and caring research the authors note the need for these ideals to be grounded in a clear normative philosophy a : *“Systematic assertion of criteria used to judge good forms of organization”* (Ibid: 546). Following this quote we are pointed towards Hardt and Negri (2000, 2004) and Gibson-Graham (1996) although these are not explicitly developed. When normativity is given more discussion the critical performativists propose a fix to the antagonistic outlook of CMS, an outlook that, it is argued, provides too much of a focus on what is ‘bad’ and ‘problematic’ and has no political base upon which something might be considered good. Currently, however, it is just an offer:

“A performative CMS would take a step further and seek to innumerate and justify the claims around the political orientation of CMS (Bohm, 2005). It would be clear about what it wants, or at least debate it.” (Spicer et al, 2009: 553)

It is good to see an attempt to encourage debate around ‘what CMS might want’, but if the critical performativists are hoping to show how we might engage with management, do we not need more than a proposal to talk more? Spicer et al (2009) go on:

“In order to make such choices, performative CMS might take advantage of normative resources within political philosophy (e.g. Kymlicka, 2001; Wolin, 2004). Here we do not seek to proscribe a

singular set of criteria. Rather, we are gesturing towards the need to begin the debate about what these criteria may actually be and the potential costs and sacrifices involved.” (p553)

So now it is possible to add Kymlicka and Wolin to the list of Czarniawska, Hardt and Negri and Gibson-Graham as a potential resource for a normative base within CMS. These proposals beg the questions: why this shirking of responsibility to other departments within the university? And does CMS not have a normative base to draw from?

Having made nods to other disciplines Spicer et al do come back to a stalwart CMS concept, namely; micro-emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1993, 1996). Micro-emancipation is a concept that can be worked into many critical normative positions as it hints towards instances of resistance and breaking free from domination. Yet is sufficiently vague as to what might be considered micro-emancipatory. Spicer et al (2009) make very valid points regarding the possibility for micro-emancipations to be translated (Czarniawska and Sevón, 2005) or articulated (Willmott, 2005) by CMS researchers to other contexts and to gain greater collective power. However, as mentioned previously, the concept of micro-emancipation is broad and, on its own, struggles to be applied within a particular context (see Huault et al, 2014). For instance, is all micro-emancipation good? Should we encourage freedom from any form of domination, or should we make a special effort towards particular modes of domination and the organisations that foster them? Or are all organisations bad in that they force organisational members into buildings from 9-5 everyday? These questions are pertinent to my problematic: Anuvelar investments and whether I am to critique or advocate. The question of critique relates to a particular normative commitment within a research project and research community. If CMS aims to “do something”; propose and engage with management it will need some sort of position from which to espouse whether something is worth encouraging or not, whether an activity is good or bad. All we are left with is that managers should be respected, just like academics and if possible we should talk

to them more. Which sounds like going into the world, dirtying your hands and then comparing your dirt to a managers and discussing whose might be dirtier until our word count is accomplished (Latour, 2005).

Although not perfect, critical performativity can be seen as a step towards a critical project that does not simply dismiss or attack organisations and management. Where the approach is limited, however, is, firstly, in its lack of a normative stance, perhaps linked to its focus upon the largely a-political perspective of actor network theory. Although citations are given as to the type of normative commitments, which would help us discern if Anuvelar's reliance on typical managerial control mechanisms are "bad" or not, I strongly believe that the CMS community can tentatively build a degree of normativity into its workings through engagement with organisations. Not theoretically discerning in advance a form of ethical or political commandments but through the documentation and elaboration of organisations that doing things differently who share, perhaps, a common adversary with CMS members. The second limitation of critical performativity is perhaps the scale of engagement with organisations. As CMS, although it is large, does not have the sheer numbers that large consulting firms have it would be very difficult, even if organisations readily let CMS scholars through the door, to attend to organisations one at a time. What is needed, are examinations and demonstrations of political discourses that attempt to change the status quo. By discourses I am not talking about abstract notions of freedom or socialism but concrete discourses that structure struggles and passionately engage individuals in a political project (Laclau, 2005). Such an activity introduces a discussion of normativity directly into CMS' research activities, rather than superimposes normativity from theoretical sources. In order to establish this approach, in the following section, I return to the political relation of agonism and the relation between politics and the political.

## Agonism, 'Politics' and 'The Political'

Affirmatively engaging with organisations, as critical performativity attests, is exactly what needs to happen within CMS. However, the agonistic strategy in which to do so perhaps needs to be tweaked slightly. In this paper I have pointed to differences in the two different approaches to critique. These differences do not necessarily stem from vastly different political perspectives. Rather, it is the intent each perspective has with regard to the, broadly defined, radical left-wing perspectives both camps hold. Both, after all, make claims and hold onto the signifier 'critical' in all they do. Both maintain a shared perspective that the way things appear to be are not ideal and that "action" needs to be taken to address inequality, domination and the antagonistic outcomes produced by an ever-increasingly capitalist system and world. The fissure forms around what this "action" looks like.

Similarities between the approaches also spread to ontology and, in particular, the fluid nature of organisations and therefore management. Treating an organisation as both noun and, crucially, verb (Parker, 2000: 232) is mirrored in approaches on both sides of the agonistic/antagonistic divide. Considering this, the natural progression of this way of thinking is to encourage engagement with the process of organising and managing. As stated previously, it is very easy to be against something, however, it surely becomes harder and harder when that "something" becomes harder to recognise and reify as a monolithic object of hatred and angst (Clegg et al, 2003). Viewing organisation and management as not a single point of view and as tinged with ambiguity, wrought with competing articulations and representations encourages engagement and dialogue, not stable lines for conflict and struggle, as the political theory of Mouffe (2013) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) would agree.



This understanding points to a more agonistic and incremental approach to change, rather than black and white political stances.

This is where it is possible to develop some form of proposals as to what CMS would in fact like to see. Going back to the understanding of difference between ‘politics’ and ‘the political’ it is possible to see differences with regard to the antagonistic approach of CMS and the more agonistic approach of critical performativity that seeks to develop a mutually beneficial method of critical research. Arguably antagonistic CMS has a much more tightly defined and acknowledged approach to ‘the political’ inasmuch as it is clear what this type of research is against. What appears to be weaker is their approach to doing politics, insofar as their attempts to politically intervene are ultimately stunted by their lack of active engagement within the political spheres of management and organisations by, instead rejecting and seeking conflict. Writing well put together arguments about the causes and proliferation of the current state of events is a valid endeavour. However, a more agonistic approach to politics would see an active intervention with organisations and a more applied strategy of engagement that focusses on particular instances and exemplars. Something that I believe would be an important addition to critical research into organisations and management.

Scholars engaging with concept of critical performativity clearly have ideas and strategies in mind for doing politics within organisations through an engagement and dialogue with management. However, this focus, wrapped up within a solid looking methodological approach that deviates from CMS’ antagonistic focus, lacks normative content or even a position as to what it is “for”. So, in contrast to the more traditional antagonistic perspective within CMS, the critical performativists spend more time thinking about politics and less time substantiating and proposing an approach to ‘the political’. This leaves the critical performativists open to the critique, as I have shown, of ultimately floating in a position that

struggles to talk about what should be done or what could be seen as preferable. This position ironically, takes them back to the same political position of the antagonistic critical researchers, being unable to engage with management effectively. For instance, how one might approach social change in organisations and proposals as to what kinds of management a critical performative approach would like to see, or even forms of management that are deemed better or worse than others? Answering this question would point the burgeoning research on critical performativity towards an agonistic approach to 'the political'.

### A Return to the Idea of Agonism

"Of course, democracy cannot survive without certain forms of consensus, relating to allegiance to the ethico-political values that constitute its principles of legitimacy, and to the institutions in which these are inscribed. But it must also enable the agonistic expression of conflict, which requires that citizens genuinely have the possibility of choosing between real *alternatives*" (Mouffe, 2014: 151, my italics)

If CMS is to operate within a zone of struggle with organisations and management what needs to be articulated are concrete instances of struggle by organisations, in effect, against other organisations. In this sense, the agonistic mode of political engagement is similar to the case of Anuvelar: seeking to change the dominant status quo from the inside. As CMS has been given a fairly strong voice in business schools, a strategy for agonistic politics would be to point to, elaborate and advocate certain organisations and the discourses that form and motivate the various political struggles against neo-liberal capitalism. In contrast to a theoretical position that explains away struggles, what is needed is a position that enables and explicates struggles in a form and language that will gain purchase with adversaries, not

enemies, in the dominant system. As mentioned previously, this is a strategy that seek to build understandings of discourses that go beyond changing and exploring individual instances within organisations. This form of critique stands in contrast to antagonistic critique that sees any form of struggle as futile, thus reinforcing the inevitability of capitalism. Instead it seeks to join up various struggles against the status quo, be they sustainability and environmentalism (in this instance) or feminism, equality, unionisation or consumer movements to name a few. To finish this paper I want to propose a productive way of addressing my particular problem and also a way of engaging in agonistic and performative critique. A form of critique that moves beyond negativity, yet joins up 'the political' to the politics of organising.

### Alternatives and Agonism: No more comfort

As a concluding point I want to work through a proposal on how to approach and encourage social change in organisations through advocating certain 'alternative' forms of organisation as preferable. But within this understanding there is also an alternative understanding of capitalism. By advocating certain cases and instances, where organisations have tweaked the system or opted out altogether, it is possible to be "less theory driven" as the critical performativists urge. But also, to provide fully fledged alternatives that are happening "out-there" in the world. These alternatives are less abstract in character than utopian fiction or political idealism and offer a fertile ground where engagement is far likelier to happen, both in the classroom and when talking to managers. More importantly, I want to conclude that through engaging and advocating alternatives it is possible to positively help in producing change for the better.

Interest in alternatives to capitalism, organisation and traditional forms of management has grown alongside the need for “getting things done” and becoming more engaged and performative in CMS (Parker et al, 2014; Parker et al, 2007; Atzeni, 2012). In a recently published book Parker et al (2014) explore many organisational forms, alternative “management” practices and the fascinating breadth of organisations that are doing things differently within the current capitalist system. Parker et al’s approach to engaging with organizing and management sets itself up far more broadly within the capitalist system as a whole. In contrast to the critical performativists, they set up an agonistic commitment from the start by addressing capitalism directly:

“Instead of taking capitalism as a necessary starting point for political or economic analysis we want to de-centre capitalism, recognizing that it is a partial, incomplete and contradictory system, or rather ‘systems’... only through theoretical suturing can these differences and absences be integrated into a single, unified system” (Parker et al, 2014: 18)

In embracing alternatives, Parker et al hope to avoid the inevitability of capitalism, the argument that there is no alternative (TINA), that it is “*now easier to imagine the end of the world, than the end of capitalism*” (Jameson, 2003: 76). Although similar, in some respects to Spicer et al (2009), in the sense that there is an agonistic intent to go beyond being critical of other people, economic ideas and institutions and to turn some of this into a strategy of providing suggestions and resources. However, in contrast to the critical performativists, Parker et al (2014) actually propose and support actual cases of alternative forms of organising ranging from scavenging to microfinance and alternative currency to communes. These alternative examples all interact with the status quo and some of which are vastly different from the capitalist system in which they operate. Others are merely tweaks to the system and not radical departures. Over-riding all interactions with the ‘market’, the status quo or the mainstream, however, is an understanding of the sense of dynamism and fluidity within capitalism. This relationship rests upon the assumption that the world is complex (a

sentiment agreed upon within the majority of the CMS community; antagonistic and agonistic a like) with *“different histories and spaces running parallel to the rise of different capitalisms”* (Ibid: 31). This understanding underpins the notion of good and bad alternatives/organisations, with both having upsides and downsides and the difficulties of saying whether some organisations/practices are unambiguously good or bad:

“Markets can be hugely helpful forms of reward and distribution in some circumstances, and communes can be oppressive and narrow places which crush individuals. Hierarchies of authority can be helpful, too, on occasion, particularly for making quick decisions while democratic and popular education could easily reproduce sexist and racist ideas” (p31)

Returning to my initial problem, the work on alternatives offers no real solace to my concerns but it is a start. The problem I found, regarding Anuvelar, essentially stems from a question over means and ends. Are the managerial means of motivating, controlling and organising justified by the ends of the organisation which could be arguably put forward as “good”? In other words, is it enough to decide that a particular form of organising aims at an end that we deem to be “good”?

My problematic is echoed in Parker et al’s thinking:

“So, if a big bank is making money, but people are being lifted out of poverty, then we might be satisfied. Or, if a very hierarchical form of managerialism is being used in a company that manufactures organic foods, then we could agree that this is still a good organization” (2014: 34)

This thinking can of course be played in reverse, as the antagonistic variants of CMS would propose. Insofar as the means used clearly are not acceptable. To upset this particular apple cart it could then be possible to foresee an organisation involved in democratic decision making stressing the autonomy of individuals in a very flat hierarchical structure yet this company is cutting down the rainforest to raise cattle. This is a tricky terrain to negotiate

and can lead to paradoxical outcomes and presents very important areas for theorising and exploration.

Parker et al's approach on alternatives develop an agonistic normative approach within 'the political'. Critical performativity stresses the research practices, engagement strategies and 'politics' needed for an agonistic engagement with organisations/management. However, on its own, critical performativity is not enough lacking an approach to the 'the political' and the proposal of what might be deemed preferable. Furthermore, as stated, antagonistic CMS has its uses but offers nothing going forward. Indeed, work on alternatives takes the advice of Atkin and Hassard (1996) to work from within the current system. To change things from the 'belly of the beast', a term used in, for instance in Fabian socialism and a phrase uttered many times at Anuvelar during my ethnography. Displaying and advocating alternative organisations allows a push for *"certain specific changes in certain specific places and not generalized attempts to change the nature of capitalism and the modern state."* (Pekka Sorsa, 2013: 192). This issue-based form of critique allows a platform and a fully-fledged example, not just a metaphorical utopia, for discussion with both managers and other academics within a shared vocabulary (Voronov, 2008). In many respects it is possible to see a potential cross-over with the idea of micro-emancipation (Alvesson and Willmott, 1992) which is highlighted as an important endeavour by Spicer et al (2009) and the CMS community more broadly. The idea of micro-emancipation is not something I want to discredit, however, a more agonistic approach might offer a slightly different approach. I would argue it would be useful to reverse this idea. Instead of looking and shining a light upon instances of resistance within nasty or dark organisations, why not start with organisations that could be termed 'good' or 'alternative' and find the nasty and dark elements within. Such an endeavour, in terms of an agonistic approach would show that, of course no organisation is perfect, but, importantly, it provides a more powerful and positive platform to engage an adversary. I finish this paper with a discussion of what such

engagements might look like and link into the ethnographic work conducted with Anuvelar Investments.

### Promoting Concrete Struggles: What is to be done

If CMS works on exploring and demonstrating alternatives it promotes an agonistic alignment between academic research and organisations that are seeking to change the system. Subsequently, returning to the problem I faced with Anuvelar, the best option, I would argue, is to explore and explain the over-riding features and discourses that motivate and form the political actions evident within the organisation. In this particular instance it was based around the notion of sustainability as a discourse that challenges the status quo within the finance industry. My analysis (see Parker, 2014a, 2014b), took on-board the post-foundational perspective of discourse theory (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985; Laclau, 1993; Laclau, 2005; Glynos and Howarth, 2007) and developed an understanding of both the representation of sustainability and the emotive and affective force that motivates this political engagement. This took the form of establishing what the organisation does, what they are hoping to change and why it could thus be considered an alternative organisation. But this work also seeks to build more broadly on the wider discussions of sustainability and the potential it has to challenge the dominant ways of conducting business.

Such work echoes with a politically post-foundational understanding of CMS. Within post-foundational politics there is always a dominant narrative or discourse. It is through hegemonic processes of struggle that particular ways of viewing the world and particular, political, ways of categorising things can change (Foucault, 1977; 1980). As Pekka-Sorsa (2013:190) notes in relation to agonism and antagonism in CMS:

“By accepting hegemony as the foundation for the political in agonistic terms, it would be legitimate for CMS to engage in counter-hegemonic struggles (i.e. to promote alternative hegemonies within a plurality of views). If the position would be antagonistic, CMS could not engage in or take responsibility of hegemonic politics in the first place. Antagonism towards hegemony implies that one should only recognize hegemony and not to fall in its trap” (Pekka-Sorsa, 2013: 190)

This does not necessarily have to be understood within the theoretical framework of Laclau and Mouffe (1985). It essentially says, if you do not play by the rules of the game or even use the same language as your fellow players, you are not playing the same game.

Subsequently, you will struggle to succeed. By moving towards an agonistic approach to critical research, that seeks to engage with actors and organisations that represent the mainstream with successful business models, organisational structures and agendas, there are possibilities to change things.

If CMS were to contribute and develop resources detailing alternative forms of organising and managing this allows a space for discussion and potentially linkages to be made across different realms of business and academia. Relating back to post-foundational approaches to politics; change happens through discursive spaces that allow potential equivalences and commonalities to develop. Addressing ‘the political’ and developing principles for politics within organisations provides a platform for engagement with existing management and organisations. “Getting things done” should involve pointing to, exploring and understanding things that are already being done and not problematising a particular version of science or research. This change in political tack does not come without problems, however, it also allows new opportunities for theorising interwoven with empirical problems, fresh discussion and new horizons for agonistic engagement, critique and possibly change.

I agree that engagement and agonistic research can also play out when collecting data and doing research as Spicer et al (2009) advocate. Critical action research that addresses



information systems, education and change has developed gradually over the years and is something that has within its approach an agonistic perspective (e.g. Baskerville and Wood-Harper, 1996; Macalpine and Marsh, 2009). Such an approach allows the possibility of being a critical consultant, pointing out problem areas and working to help make them better whilst at the same time collecting data for later consideration. Even if a critical researcher is not comfortable engaging with action research projects there are still many avenues from which to encourage change. In my particular case I was able to take part in meetings and to work on projects and offer a critical voice to some of the activities happening at Anuvelar. Furthermore, in the interviews I conducted it was possible to offer a space for reflection on both the good and bad aspects of the organisation. These are practices that all critical research allows and I believe should continue as excellent opportunities to engage with organisations. By becoming more agonistic, more pragmatic and developing a shared vocabulary with the organisations and managers we study; CMS can pay out the promise of 20 years of antagonism.

However, taking a bigger step, it would be possible to put together some form of catalogue or list of alternative organisations. This could be done in via the traditional method of a book, building on what Parker et al (2014) have achieved, or alternatively, as web resources such as a blog or a formal website. By setting up a catalogue of alternative organisations detailing what they do well or differently and the political form and passions developed in this setting, CMS scholars could all contribute to a resource that could be used for teaching, discussion and potentially consultation and engagement with managers directly. Of course, no organisation is perfect, in which case it will be important to include negatives as well as positives within individual reports. Such an approach would focus on communicating and discussing ideas with an adversary about and around a shared object, such as an organisation, be it a bank or a supermarket. Anuvelar could obviously be a part of this list, perhaps even un-anonymised, which is not possible for this particular paper. Along with

Anuvelar there could be other examples of alternative organisations, cooperatives such as Suma wholefoods, John Lewis (Paranque and Willmott, 2014) or the Edinburgh Bicycle cooperative.

By joining up struggles within an agonistic strategy of engagement, however imperfectly realised, allows a starting point for discussion and access to arguments that will make an impact and not just attack. Antagonisms within society will never disappear, however, the framing of these antagonisms is a productive and affirmative method of insuring that political struggle remains and can be communicated to an adversary not purely an enemy.



## Conclusion

In the following section I provide a summary of my thesis and then reinforce the contributions to knowledge I make throughout this thesis and draw together themes of my research. I finish by discussing my recommendations for future research and reflecting upon the research process.

The first paper in this thesis addressed the contingent and contested nature of the discourse of sustainability through an empirical exploration of the ways in which its meaning is constructed within a particular organisation. Within the extant literature on sustainability there exist multiple definitions and perceptions as to what sustainability stands to be. With some scholars seeing the term as an ideological tool co-opted to maintain the status quo (for example Banerjee, 2003, 2007; Levy, 1997), an opportunity to align profits and beneficial environmental and social impacts (Elkington, 1997; Bolch, 2008) and for some a radical concept to challenge the status quo that faces severe resistance (Saurin, 1996; Tregidga et al, 2013). To examine and contest these perspectives I provide an empirical exploration of the meaning of sustainability within a particular context. I ask two questions:

*What is the role of power in constructing particular meanings of sustainability?*

*In relation to power, how are the boundaries drawn with respect to sustainability within organisational practices?*

Drawing upon an understanding of discourse, that sees meaning as relational to other meanings and structured through power, I focus upon the ways in which the boundaries and limits of the discourse of sustainability are formed within an organisational setting. In particular, I show how the contingent nature of sustainability both influences and becomes influenced through the hegemonic struggle for meaning by drawing on two vignettes. In the first vignette I show how the breaching of an unspoken set of values is demonstrable of a

boundary being established with regard to what sustainability stands to be. In this way, the vignette is an example of how organisational practices are organised discursively through a combination of elements and ideas but also through the rejection of others. The disgust felt by the credit manager related to the breaching of the norm points to the prevalence of a certain “us”. This “us” establishes a boundary as to what is considered sustainable within this particular organisation. Moreover, this disgust also demonstrated the rejection of an “other” (that which is not part of sustainability). However, the setting of these boundaries points to the particularly antagonistic nature of sustainability as being associated with both financial and social/environmental imperatives. On the one hand, there are the values that support and frame sustainability as being contra to the money oriented big corporates. On the other, there is still the necessary goal of profit and survival for a sustainable organisation. This productive antagonism provides the basis for a functioning discourse of sustainability.

However, what then becomes important to explore is the role of power in this relation. In the second vignette I show how despite the use of typical financial tools and practices the discourse of sustainability modifies financial concepts like returns on investment, security and balancing risk.

Drawing on the idea of the empty signifier, as a powerful concept that pins certain meanings and practices together, I show that the discourse of sustainability effectively re-articulates certain understandings of financial activities and tools. In this sense sustainability becomes a powerful modifier and a referent point for members of Anuvelar but also a sign of a perennial contradiction and tension.

This paper thus offers a contribution to the understandings of sustainability as it prioritises the role of tensions and contradictions within the discourse as being productive. On the one hand, sustainability stands against a dominant mode of business which in this case is

represented by financial tools and practices and thus establishes boundaries of “us” and “other” or “them”. On the other, it is a discourse that in many respects has to work within and through the “other” to distinguish itself as different but also as a method of engagement. Moreover, by focussing on the role of power and hegemonic struggle, the paper establishes that although sustainability may be considered open and ambiguous it depends on the discursive arena in which it operates and the role of power.

The second paper in this thesis builds from the antagonistic nature of sustainability and looked to ideas of identification, affect and fantasy to explore the subjective issues when working within a concept that is dependent upon conflict and contradiction. In particular, this paper addressed the pull of sustainability as a discourse that promised a unification of various counter-capitalistic, or, at least, fairer versions of capitalist discourses. I asked the question:

*What is the role of affect when examining the discourse of sustainability in a contemporary organisation?*

This question related to an empirical observation, with many members of Anuvelar Investments strongly associated themselves with sustainability. Furthermore, as it pertains to an issue of engagement and identification this question also related to a contribution to the many issues associated when attempting to engage employees with sustainability which is a common theme in the strategic and human resource literature (for example: Dunphy et al, 2003; Epstein and Buhovac, 2010; Haugh and Talwar, 2010). Finally, this paper builds from the first paper by addressing the affective component of discourse and the role affect had in certain powerful discourses “sticking” to subjects. Affect in this sense was established as relating to an identification with discourse but also the perceived and felt enjoyment of such an identification. This paper established the role of beatific and horrific fantasies within the discourse of sustainability that structured this enjoyment.

In the first instance, through the use of interview data, the equivalential relationship between Anuvelar and sustainability is seen to be identified with by individuals in referent to the beatific fantasy of sustainability. There was an evident pull towards the work that Anuvelar were doing and the idea of 'matching values' was raised as an important factor in this engagement. Crucially, however, it became apparent that such an identification came in reference to an "other", to those *"paid too much"*, or through a need to *"influence in the industry"* and *"influence change"*. Subsequently, we can see an identification with sustainability as relating to the power sustainability holds as a discourse that opposes the status quo and those that symbolise the horrific fantasy. Later in the paper this fear of the "other" or horrific fantasy as an external threat was acknowledged as an internal concern for Anuvelar employees. This 'fear of becoming what you most fear', proliferated within the antagonistic nature of sustainability as working within a system it seeks to change, lead to concerns, conflicted feelings and a mis-match between perceived enjoyment and the actual practices of sustainable finance. The disappointment of lost enjoyment and the subsequent block to a fulfilling job role can be seen as a reminder as to what they stand against and in that sense maintains and reinforces their reasons for identifying with sustainability in the first place. However, there are limits as to how far this disappointment can be felt. What became apparent was an acknowledgement that sustainability needs an affective investment to approach the complex problems associated with maintaining a balance between pro-social/environmental and pro-financial logics. This paper contributes to the broader literature that states the need for the values of sustainability to be present in any implementation of sustainability (Bansal, 2003; Dunphy et al, 2003; Epstein and Buhovac, 2010). However, it clearly showed that this is not a simple process.

The third and final paper of this thesis contributed to the growing interest in performatively engaging with management practices (Spicer et al, 2009) and advocating alternative organisations (Parker et al, 2014) that stand in contrast to dominant managerial and

organisational practices. In particular, it related to a change in my perspective on what might count as critical research and how critical management studies (CMS) can be made more productive as part of a political engagement and activity.

Firstly, I established the plural understandings of CMS and the discussions regarding its nature as a group or collective. Having done this I then set up the concepts of agonistic and antagonistic forms of critique and political engagement with reference to the political theory of Chantal Mouffe (1999, 2013, 2014). Antagonistic approaches to critique are explored in their largely negative approach to engagement with organisation and management. Such a position, it is argued, provides a form of cynical distance from involvement directly with organisations. In contrast to this position, agonistic approaches to critique are explored in the form of the recent explorations of the idea of critical performativity (Spicer et al, 2009). Despite the more affirmative approach taken, concerns are raised regarding the lack of normative content in regard to what critical performativity scholars might want to see in the organisations with which they engage. Both antagonistic and agonistic approaches are then applied to an ethnographic vignette taken from my observations at Anuvelar Investments.

In noting the propensity for organisations and management to be viewed as a process on both sides of the agonistic and antagonistic divide in CMS I build upon the agonistic intent of critical performativity to pursue incremental change and not black and white political conflict against an enemy. To do so, I argue that it is possible to build a commitment to agonistic engagement within CMS by establishing more instances of alternative forms of organisation. Instead of critique CMS should aim its analysis at explaining the conditions of possibility of these organisations in order to pursue engagement around a similar object (an organisation) to those we seek influence and change.

In doing so, it is argued, CMS can work as a political force that joins up various struggles against the status quo. For example, instead of explaining away struggle and challenge to the



capitalist system we should aim to theorise, demonstrate and explain the ways in which alternative organisations and the discourses around them are positioned. Linking in with the post-foundational understanding of CMS research I argued that is only through hegemonic processes of struggle and the linking together of struggles (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985) that particular ways of viewing the world and particular and political ways of categorising things can change (Foucault, 1977, 1980).

## Contributions to Knowledge

The three papers in this thesis provide contributions to specific areas within the academic field. Taken as whole, however, general themes develop that contribute to the broader discussions of sustainability as well as the critical literature.

The concept of antagonism appears throughout this work. Be it in relation to the political stance of CMS or as a way of theorising the inherent and necessary contradictions within the discourse of sustainability. In both cases there is a drawing of boundaries, in one case it is the naming of and pursuit to change particular ways of doing things the other relates to the inherent nature of this struggle as a defining characteristic of a discourse. In both cases, however, there is the awareness of tensions and the perhaps in both instances I explore and show how tensions can eventually become productive and actually necessary. After all, without tensions and struggle, change would rarely happen for good or bad.

This thesis pursues, maintains and argues for an open and ambiguous understanding of sustainability. The idea that we should hunt for and pin down the unified meaning of sustainability so that people 'get it' is pointless as an academic exercise and potentially dangerous to what a broadly progressive discourse like sustainability can achieve. This work has shown the problems associated with sustainability being co-opted or made docile due to its seemingly fluid or 'empty' character. But it also shows that this is not always the case. We

should consider sustainability as something that has an inherent antagonism or contradiction at the centre of what it does and thus the role of power needs to be explored in its articulation. The discursive context (text, talk and practices) in which something is articulated matters. It matters because within this discursive arena meaning and therefore the use and legitimacy of sustainability can be partially and temporarily pinned in place. By power, I do not simply mean some abstract thing but the power that is visible when things are achieved or not in reference to sustainability. Such power is derived partially from boundaries of “us” and “them” that spawn individual identification and affective investment. This is the power that pushes sustainability and its related issues through and within organisations. But this comes with the caveat that firstly, conditions must be met about who might be considered a “them” to individuals in an organisation and secondly, that the “us” actually proposes change or, at least, individuals believe the “us” stands for something different. Of course, the idea that the customer and client is part of this “us” also plays a significant role.

This links to my second issue concerning the mainstream understanding that sustainability is something that can simply be embedded in an organisation (Bansal, 2003; Dunphy et al, 2003; Epstein ,2008; Epstein and Buhovac, 2010; Haugh and Talwar, 2010). Although I am in agreement that ‘human factors’ should be considered in sustainability the idea that individuals will be passive and accepting of the discourse without key conditions being met is unlikely. The antagonism at the heart of the sustainability discourse is one that, without affective investment or commitment, is a very difficult discourse to implement and develop without severe organisational/managerial force or coercion. This is evident as even in an organisation like Anuvelar, which can be considered very committed to sustainability, there were still tensions and fears concerning the tricky ground covered by sustainability as both a challenge and yet also harbouring the need to behave like a typical financial services firm. As

is evident in my work including the 'human factors' of sustainability is very important but not something that simply needs to be unlocked by a zealous HR department.

In mainstream research the fundamental, albeit productive, antagonism at the heart of sustainability is often overlooked or underplayed, my work contributes an alternative understanding that states that tensions and contradictions abound for individuals when sustainability is introduced into an organisation. However, critical scholars, I believe, go too far the other way and stress the problems caused by this antagonism too strongly. In favour of complete overhaul of the system or the abolition of environmental buzz-words they would prefer to see sustainability disappear. And the arguments brought up by Banerjee (2003) as to what is done in sustainability's name are strong. Similarly, Levy (1997) develops a solid argument about the ways in which management uses sustainability to portray itself in a better light for various reasons. Calming this reaction my thesis builds in elements of hope and potential change into the discourse of sustainability. Yes, sustainability is dependent upon certain conditions and is in no way a purely radical and revolutionary discourse, but it can evoke positive identifications and affective engagement in people and also can stand as a challenging discourse to the mainstream. In line with scholars who see the potential in sustainability (e.g. Amsler, 2009 and Tregidga et al, 2013) this thesis has argued for a possible reclamation of sustainability from corporate capitalism, if only very slightly. Such a movement should not be considered a 'sell out'. After all, Levy and Banerjee make such critical comments due to their commitment to a particular sort of environmental care and consideration for the world, we just do not agree on the political approach.

Although there are problems associated with a concept being 'empty', fluid and open there are also many rewards when it comes to engaging with people and perhaps changing minds and motivations. Having sustainability as a common term allows an entry point and an accepted platform for discussion and action. As (or if) more organisations find success in a

sustainable manner, for example see Unilever's recent growth in sustainable brands<sup>13</sup>, the power of sustainability as a discourse and what conditions are accepted as "counting" will become more refined and less easier to explain away. Finding such a platform and an entry point are issues that appear in my final paper on agonistic approaches to critique in critical management studies.

Both Banerjee and Levy sought and seek to change things with their work even if it is pointing to bad practices and the potential for them to be named under a "sustainable" umbrella. The task then becomes one of turning anger, dissent and perhaps worry and anxiety into progress and change. Such a task, I argue is born out of a deliberative strategy that seeks engagement rather than seeking conflict. I am not alone in this push for ways of engaging with management and mainstream organisations. But unlike Wickert and Schaefer (2014) I do not think 'nudging' middle managers and hoping for small wins is the best tactic for change. Nor do I agree with Hartmann (2014) who calls for critical additions to be made for functional research models and theories, which to my mind, is what critical management studies has been doing since its inception anyway. Rather, I call for an understanding and explication of a normative and agonistic alignment between academic research and organisations that are seeking to change the system. Such an attempted alignment would relate to propose genuine alternatives be they alternative organisational forms, business models, decision making processes or even proposing different understandings of value and return on investment, as is evident in my case. In addition to antagonism, change is encouraged and happens in discursive spaces that allow potential equivalences and commonalities to develop. I agree with King and Learmonth (2015) that this sort of 'engaged scholarship' may well take years or even decades of work and political imagination but this is not done by presenting only disruptive and disturbing understandings to managers. Rather,

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<sup>13</sup> <http://www.businessgreen.com/bg/news/2406748/unilever-sustainable-brands-growing-twice-as-fast>

in addition to the disruptive must be something that an individual can invest in personally that contains both the horrific and beatific. This is why I propose the need for equivalences and commonalities not purely challenges and critique to develop between academia and those who we study. This argument works for both academic engagement with business and organisations but also can be applied to explain how sustainability became a political issue for organisations.

## Limitations and Future Research

I was very privileged to gain access to an organisation like Anuvelar Investments. I had originally planned on studying sustainability within a particular department of an organisation. To then be presented with the opportunity to research and work in an organisation that wholly embodies sustainability as a value and as a core aspect of their business provided an excellent arena to explore the more subjective nuances of the discourse and its articulation. However, the “*extreme*” or “*deviant*” nature of the case (Flyvbjerg, 2006: 230) does mean that my findings, although relevant, methodologically thorough and useful would benefit from some form of comparison. Personally, I am currently working on access to a mainstream financial institution to provide such a case. I am well aware that what Anuvelar do is not the norm, however, this is what made them so very interesting and important to explore and understand. However, to apply the perspectives of discourse theory to explore the articulations within a conventional organisation whereby sustainability is potentially pushed away from any form of prominence is an important contribution. Moreover, to explore the identifications and affective issues of fantasy and enjoyment in a mainstream financial services firm would provide a very interesting comparison to this thesis.

Along a similar train of thought it would be interesting to see if my observations and explanations could be extended to other geographical areas? – Considering the prominent

position given to subjectivity and identification as well as language it would be very interesting to pursue a similar line of questioning in non-English speaking countries and countries with different histories of banking and finance.

I believe there are further theoretical contributions to be made and more conversations and convergence with the more mainstream theoretical perspectives in CSR and sustainability. A common theoretical trope in the institutional theory literature with regard to CSR and sustainability is the notion of 'decoupling' (Haack et al, 2012; Caprar and Neville, 2012).

Although valid and interesting ways of exploring and explaining particular CSR and sustainability practices the notion of power within institutional theory is largely avoided (Clegg, 2010). The inclusion of power and an understanding of sustainability and CSR as containing an inherent antagonism and a direct challenge would offer a useful theoretical tool or framework to those who study sustainability from an institutional perspective.

Conversely, facets of institutional theory will be very useful to draw upon in my own future work. For instance, Pache and Santos' (2013) understanding of institutional logics can be a more conclusive way of introducing the competing logics apparent in the antagonistic understanding of sustainability. Moreover, drawing and conversing with Battilana and Dorado's (2010) notion of hybridity would be a productive way of setting up the tense and conflicted organisational/institutional context within which discourses and subjectivities are articulated.

It would also be very interesting to see if it is possible to extrapolate the theoretical developments and explanations derived from this study to other morally loaded, politically contested and perceived contradictory concepts. For example, can similar observations (and explanations) be seen in practitioners getting to grips with diversity and equality, both of which have had 'business case' constructed in a similar way to sustainability. Moreover, are similar tensions and performative fantasies apparent within organisations that pursue

similarly 'moral' activities. For example, will similar fantasies and processes of affect be apparent in charity organisations or NGOs? Although the logic of finance may well be lessened what tensions might be observable for the individual and the organisation?

Concerning sustainability research more broadly I think there needs to be more research into the various ways in which sustainability is quantified. Currently there are a vast array of metrics, measures and ratings related to sustainability or ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) reports this translation of work practices into numbers is a very useful way of communicating with big business. However, I think it is important to explore the potential problems and biases concerning what ESG reports can actually measure. Moreover, it would be very interesting to see the way in which these reports and measures are interacted with within an organisation. Are there any unintended consequences? How might these reports be manipulated?

As a final point, I believe that research on sustainability and its related discourses of CSR, social responsibility or "greening" in general need more explorative and empirical studies that engage with the activities and practices of sustainability. Such studies should involve ethnographic work within an organisation and aim to explore how individuals interact, understand and cope with the evident contradictions apparent in discourses that seek to function within antagonism. Such insights are not found in company reports or marketing, and neither can they be assumed on the basis of structural generalisations. A need for explorative and qualitative research is already noted in the CSR literature (Costas and Kärreman, 2013) and needs to be followed through to the sustainability literature. Further research needs to understand sustainability as a concrete discourse of political import and as a source of identification for many within and outside organisations.

## Concluding Remarks: Motivations and Reflections

My six months at Anuvelar were some of the toughest I have experienced in my life, perhaps closely followed by the last six months of my PhD. At Anuvelar I was having to learn the terminology, interview people, do my job, smile and was constantly moving every 2 weeks to a new department or group where I had to start the whole process again. Although it was hard, it was a fantastic experience and I was very happy for the opportunity. In this thesis, which I will be sharing with the members of Anuvelar shortly, I wanted to clarify and explain the nature of the work Anuvelar are doing. I wanted to link into both the political character of sustainability and the passions for sustainability and the environment that were so evident during my time at the organisation.

Laclau, talking about theory notes:

“..It is only through a multitude of concrete studies that we will be able to move towards an increasingly sophisticated theory” (Laclau, 1990: 235)

I would not disagree with this premise, but I also believe that this intent informs an approach to politics too. As I have argued in this thesis, as an academic community I believe it is important for us to develop empirical/concrete research that addresses interesting and alternative organisations that attempt to change the system in which they operate.

Alongside contributions to the sustainability literature more broadly, I hope that the agonistic approach I take comes across in this work. Discourses like sustainability can challenge, modify and motivate provide a platform for struggle in contemporary society. I believe the contributions I make to this understanding and its particular presence within Anuvelar can fan the flames of change and, hopefully, will encourage more concrete studies that can develop theoretical understanding, but also, equally important platforms for political engagement.



The PhD experience for me has been a real journey of discovery, both in terms of my learning but also for me as a person. I am sure plenty of students say this and I suppose that is more to do with the style of learning a PhD offers, in the UK at least. I am very lucky to have the opportunity to complete my PhD at the University of Warwick, with support from the ESRC and some of the best supervisors in my field. It has not always been easy and nor should it, but it has always been completely and utterly engaging.

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## Appendix

### Coded Interviews

Including initial 27 interviews

<b>Name</b>	<b>Memo Link</b>	<b>Sources</b>	<b>References</b>
Head of compliance		1	1
MO - after our customer visit		1	1
Head of HR (HQ)		2	2
Head of Affiliates Scheme		1	1
Head of Marketing		0	0
Head of Personal Banking		1	1
Head of Personal Banking		1	1
Head of Business Banking		0	0
Head of BB (2)		1	1
Head of BB		1	1
JM – Customer Operations co-worker		0	0
Customer operations co-worker - JM		1	1
JM- discussing lending		1	1
Co-worker in BB		1	1
Co-worker in customer contact		1	1
Co-worker in customer contact 2		1	1
Co-worker in Investment arm - work		1	1
Co-worker in investment arm -charity		1	1

Co-worker in Marketing Department		1	1
Co-worker in Risk		1	1
Customer operations co-worker		1	1
Customer operations co-worker - dragon		1	1
Estates Manager		1	1
Head of customer contact		1	1
Head of Investments		1	1
Interviewing 2 members of customer contact team		1	1
IT manager		1	1
Longstanding RM in BB		1	1
Marketing co-worker		1	1
Personal Banking co-worker		1	1
Project Manager		1	1
Receptionist		1	1
RM - BB		1	1
Senior member of customer contact		1	1
Team leader in customer contact		1	1
W - PR department		1	1
AG - on her last day – project manager		1	1
Head of HR (UK)		1	1
Human Resources Officer		1	1
Interview with JM about Pay issue in Monday morning meeting		1	1
KPI - with L		1	1
Marketing Intern		1	1

MD - paradoxes		1	1
PA to MD		1	1
PR.ex-researcher		1	1
SW		1	1

## Induction Interviews

1. Compliance (head)
2. Credit Committee (head)
3. Customer Operations (head)
4. Customer Operations (manager)
5. Finance (manager)
6. Estates (head)
7. Customer Contact (head)
8. Customer Contact (manager)
9. Marketing (head)
10. Operations (head)
11. Personal banking (head)
12. IT (head)
13. Business Banking (RM)
14. Finance (head)
15. BB (RM – environment team)
16. BB (head)
17. MD

## Initial Coding

Name	Memo Link	Sources	References
Quotes		14	28
Problems and Contradictions		21	43
Over work		5	8
Cynicism		8	14
Resentment of RMs		2	2
Growth		12	22
Professionalism		16	47
Selling		8	18
Innovation		6	7
Small Bank		15	20
Emotions		12	15
Values		25	83
Diversity of opinion and time		22	48
Journey		8	10
Community		13	19

Engagement	23	42
Personal Connection	11	16
Why joined	21	23
Building	12	14
Authenticity	6	10
Living the values	5	9
Personal Ethics	26	56
Contradictions in values	5	14
Mission and Vision	3	4
Old x values	10	17
Culture	12	18
Values Team	6	9
Competence vs Values	7	17
Decision Making	4	8
Spirituality	12	35
Verse	5	8
Uncomfortable	2	9
Process and Bureaucracy	10	21
Telling	3	3
Broader Issues	11	15
Banking	26	51
Politics	16	32
An alternative	19	44
Definition of Sustainability	7	11
Remote management and working from home	4	9
Control	7	12
Alternative Organisation	2	2
Reflections	2	2
Diversity	2	7